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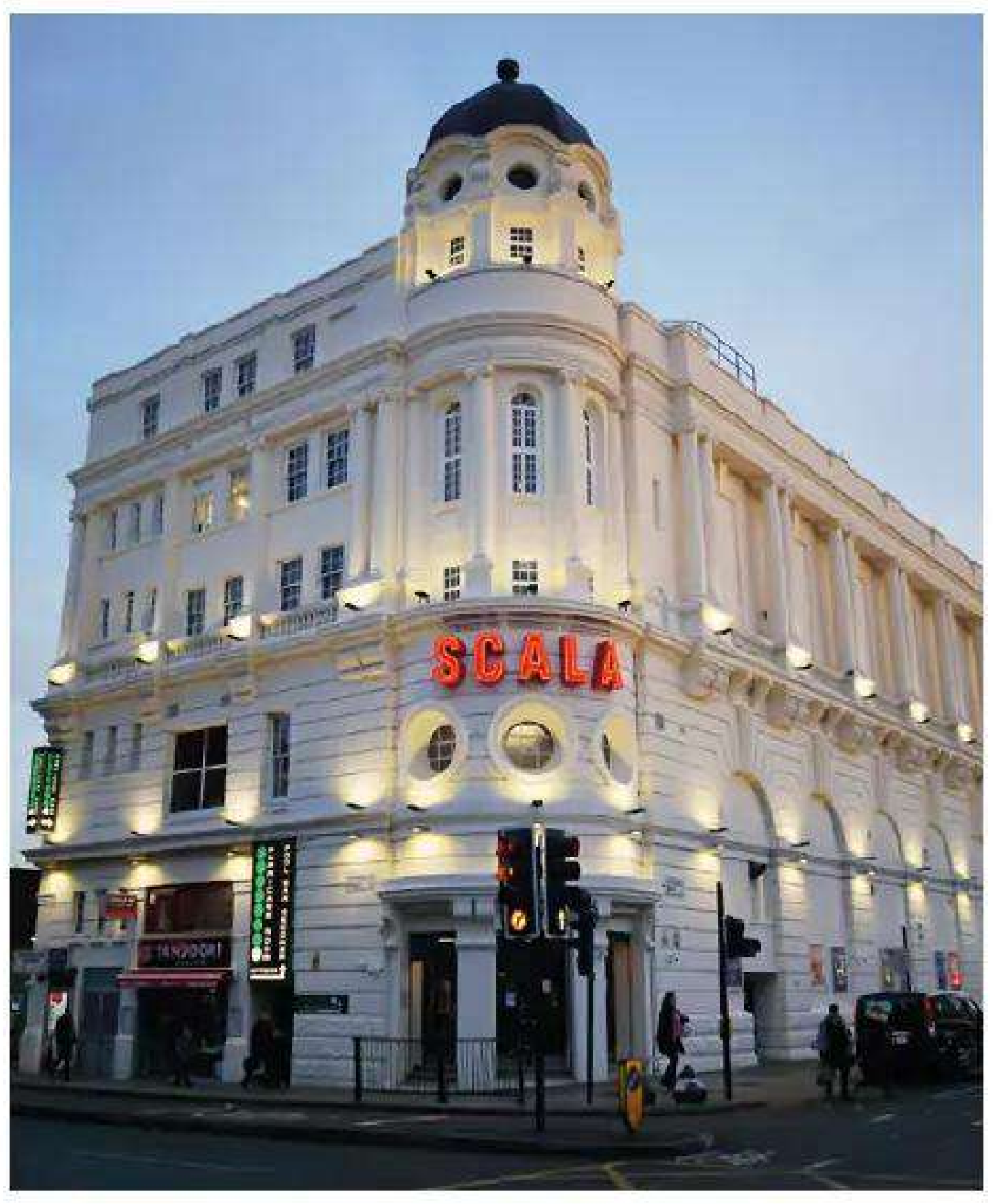
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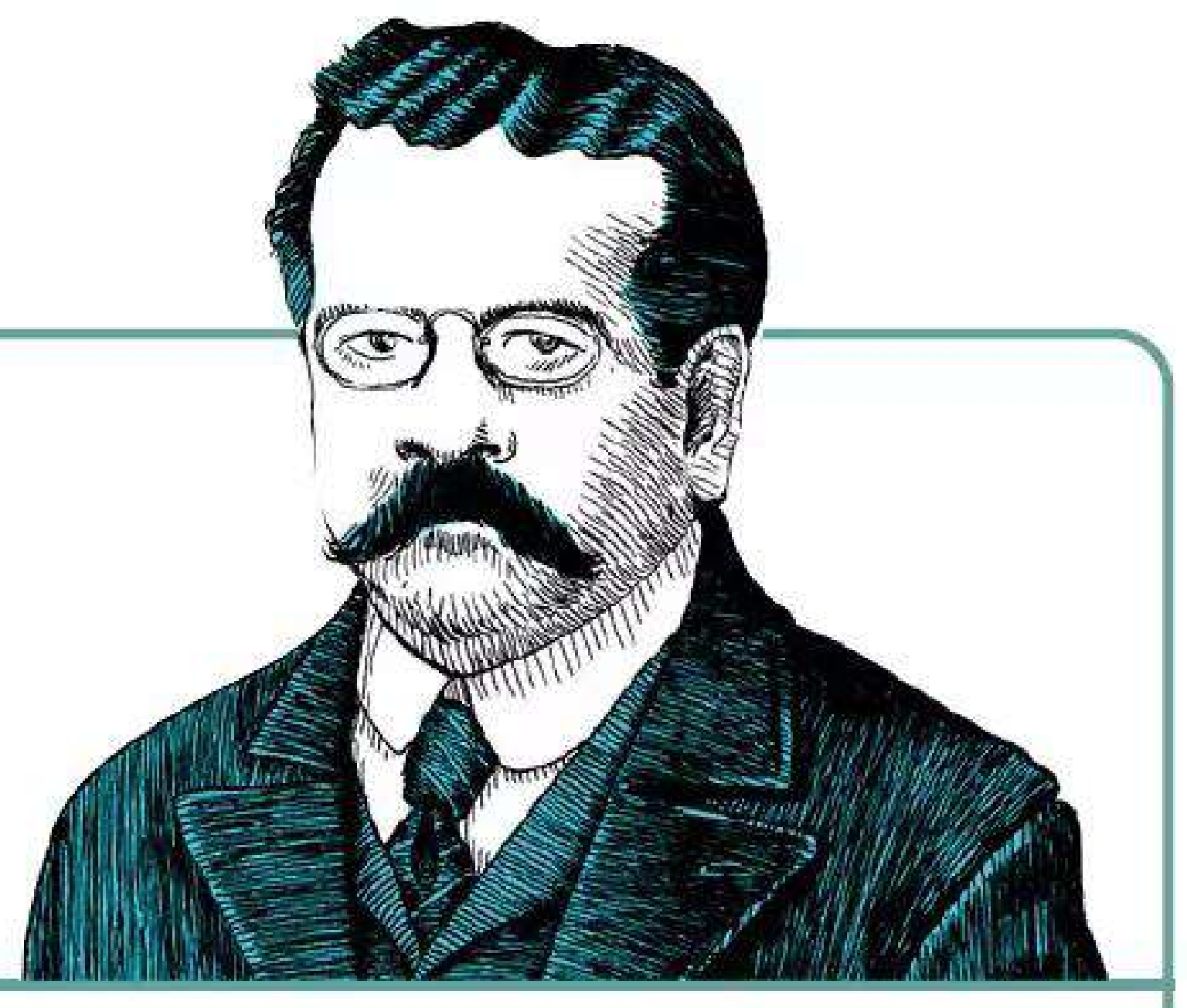

CAPUCINE DESLOUIS

Ghost hunting at night school

VICAR WARNS OF OUIJA BOARDS

GHOST OF CYCLIST 'DISAPPEARS'

'Cycling ghost could be my father'

REVEILLE 20 JUL 1973

A 'HAUNTING' NEW REVEILLE S

Uninvited guests

Ghostly monk bowled me over

NEWS OF THE WEIRD

Welcome to our first issue of 2024, and a varied programme of strangeness to greet the new year. Our cover story (p.28) is the first instalment in Alan Murdie's two-part survey of how British newspapers treated reports of ghosts and related phenomena in the 1970s. The decade has become known in recent years as that of 'the haunted generation', but as Alan argues, the preponderance of spooky stories making headlines has nothing to do with hauntology and everything to do with actual hauntings: "Ghosts were national and local news throughout the 1970s, with an abundance of actual sightings that markedly contrast with the diminishing returns received from so many ghost hunting groups today." And one of the reasons we can look back in some detail at the cases that made the papers is one man's assiduous collecting of clippings through the decade and beyond. Tom Perrott, researcher, author and for many years Chairman of the Ghost Club, built up a card index of some 3,000 records relating to haunted locations around the British Isles, and collected news reports about them which he pasted into a number of scrapbooks – a combination of a more-narrowly focused Charles Fort and an FT clipster. Thanks to Tom's decades-long efforts, and Alan's trawl through the scrapbooks, we can all enjoy a window onto a vanished world of ghostly goings-on, from a pair of phantom trousers in Cornwall to a spectral racehorse in Lanarkshire.

While we're on the subject of collections of forteana, UFO researcher Philip Mantle shares details (p.49) of a new home for the long unseen files of the Aerial Phenomena Research Organisation (APRO) and admonishes all of us sitting on collections of fortean materials to start thinking about their future: "Don't let your files end up as landfill, decide what you are going to do with them now!"

Elsewhere in the issue, Jane Giles and Ali Caterall share memories of strangeness at London's fabled Scala Cinema (p.36); any cinephiles fortunate enough to live in London in the heady days of the 1980s will have fond memories of the Kings Cross landmark whose wildly eclectic programme, anything goes all-nighters, subterranean rumblings and prowling cinema cats offered an experience quite different to an evening at the National Film Theatre; between the two, though, one could receive a comprehensive education in everything from George Cukor to George Kuchar. Plus, Jenny Randles (p.27) and David Clarke (p.40) examine NASA's relationship with UFOs, Jon Dear looks at Dracula's TV appearances (p.50), and in a brand new interview series we've called 'Fort Talk' (p.44), Gordon Rutter sits down with cryptozoologist Richard Freeman to discuss dragons, demons and *Doctor Who*.

ERRATA

FT433:39: Ady Collier of Claypole, Lincolnshire, wrote in with a correction to Nina Antonia's survey of British fairy postcards, which claimed that "the youth hostel at Boggle Hole has been long closed". Not so, according to Ady, who explains: "The youth hostel was refurbished and re-opened some years ago. It is a wonderful place to visit and provides excellent accommodation." He adds some useful advice: "It is essential for visitors to Boggle Hole to leave a small tribute to the boggles just inside one of the boggle caves. This will ensure good luck."

FT435:42: Owen Whiteoak, for many years FT's eagle-eyed sub-editor, spotted an unfortunate mistake in Cathi Unsworth's interview with *Wicker Man* director Robin Hardy: "There's a reference to Northern Island, which I'm almost certain was meant to be Northern Ireland."

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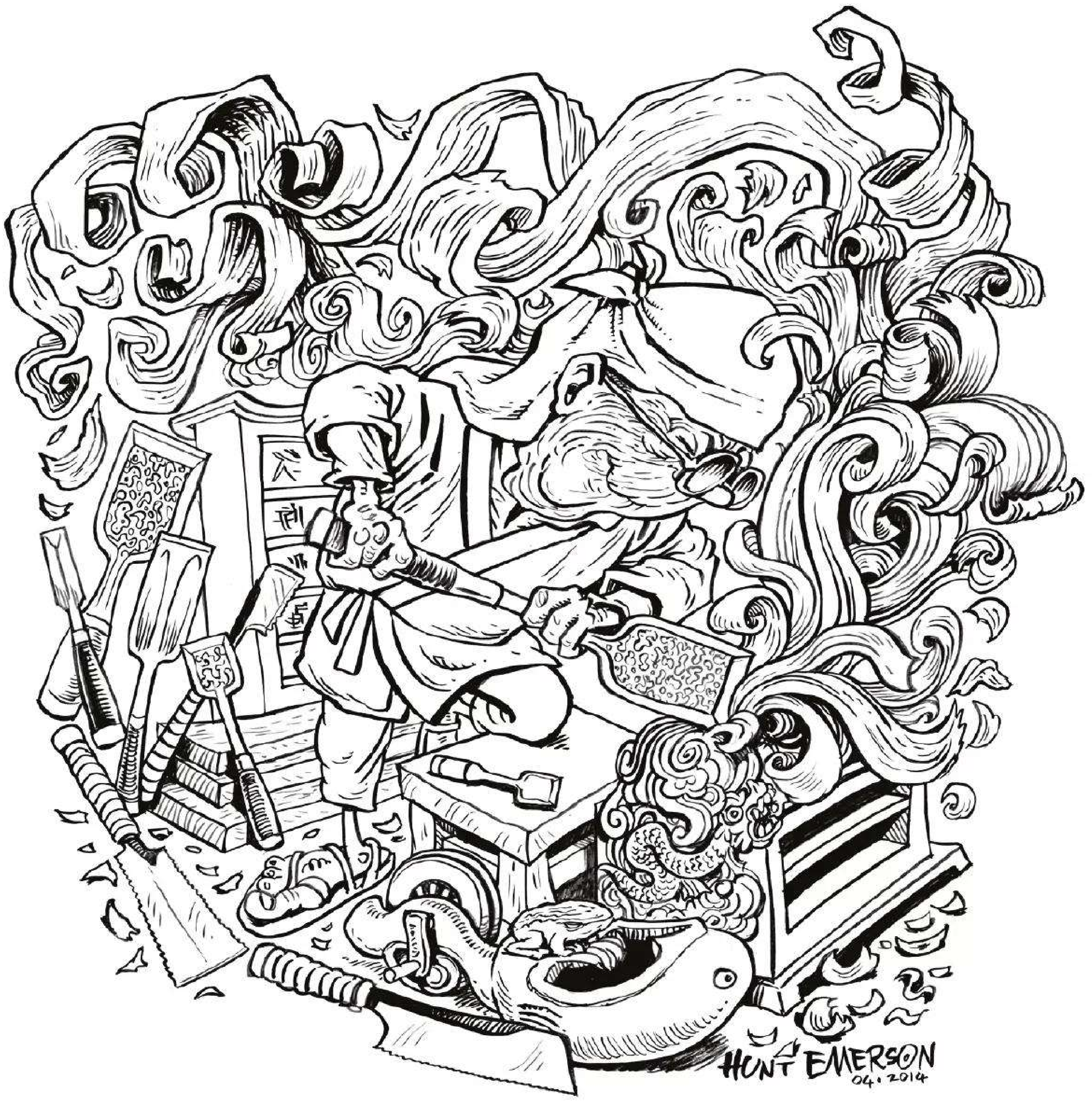
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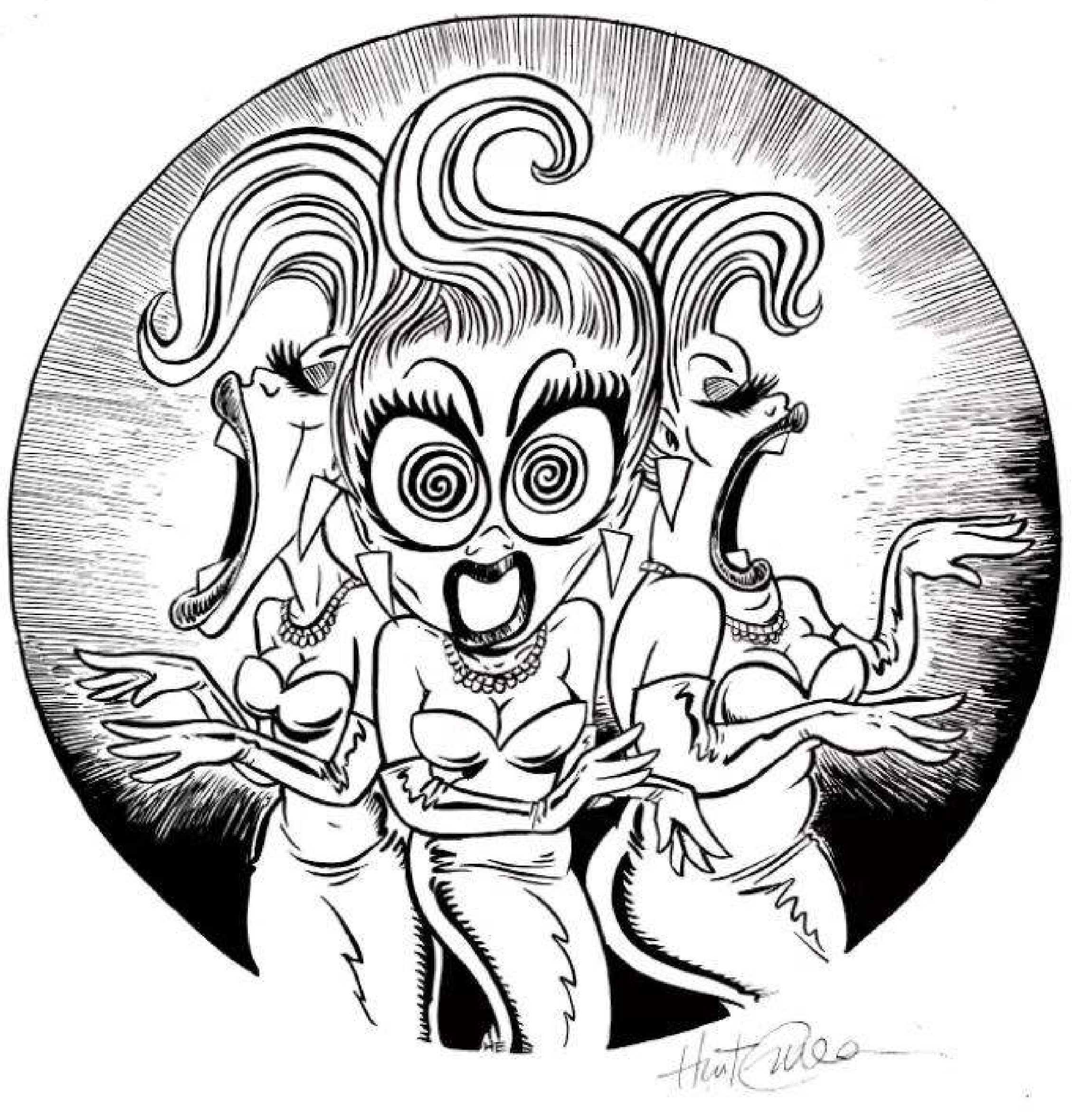

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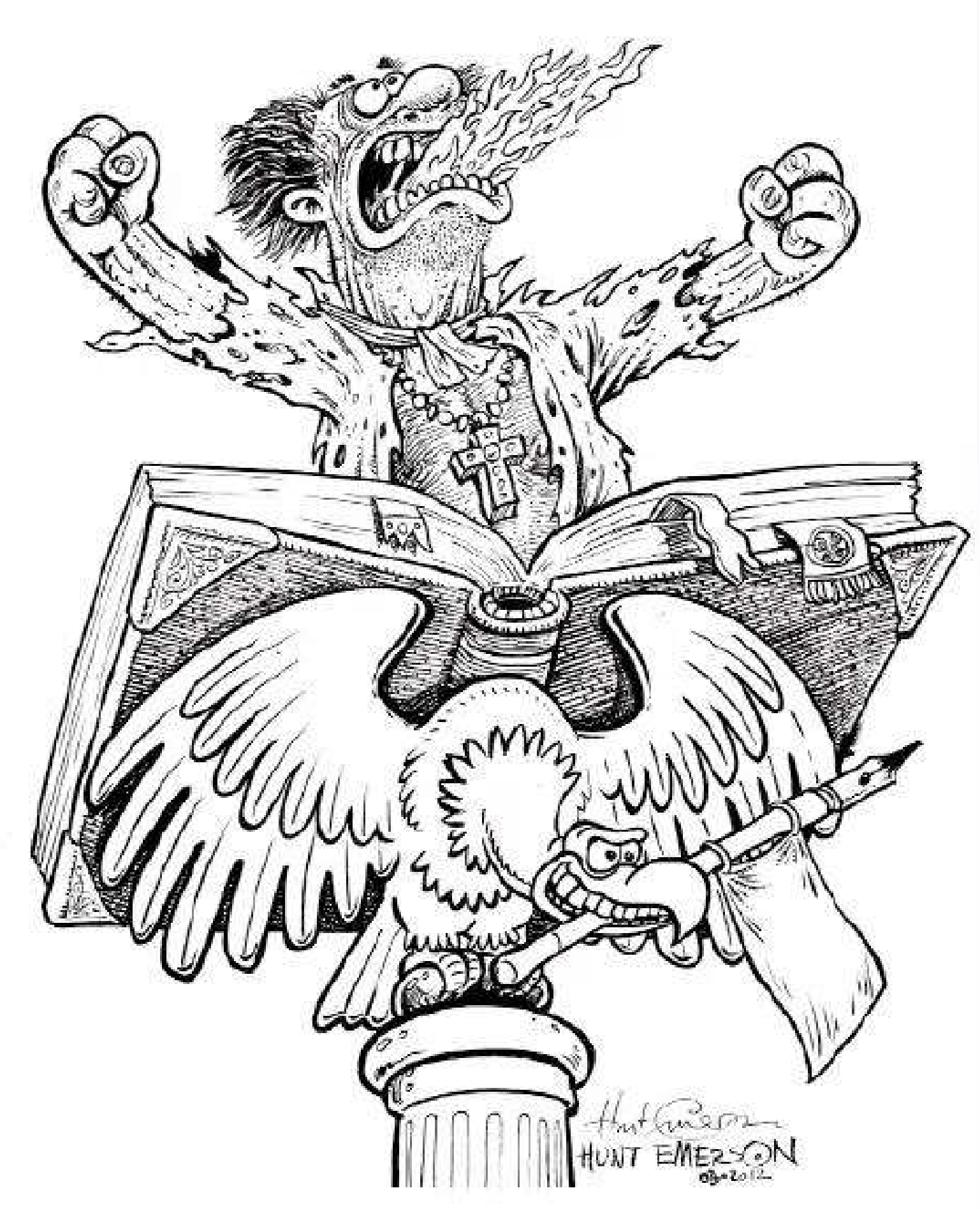
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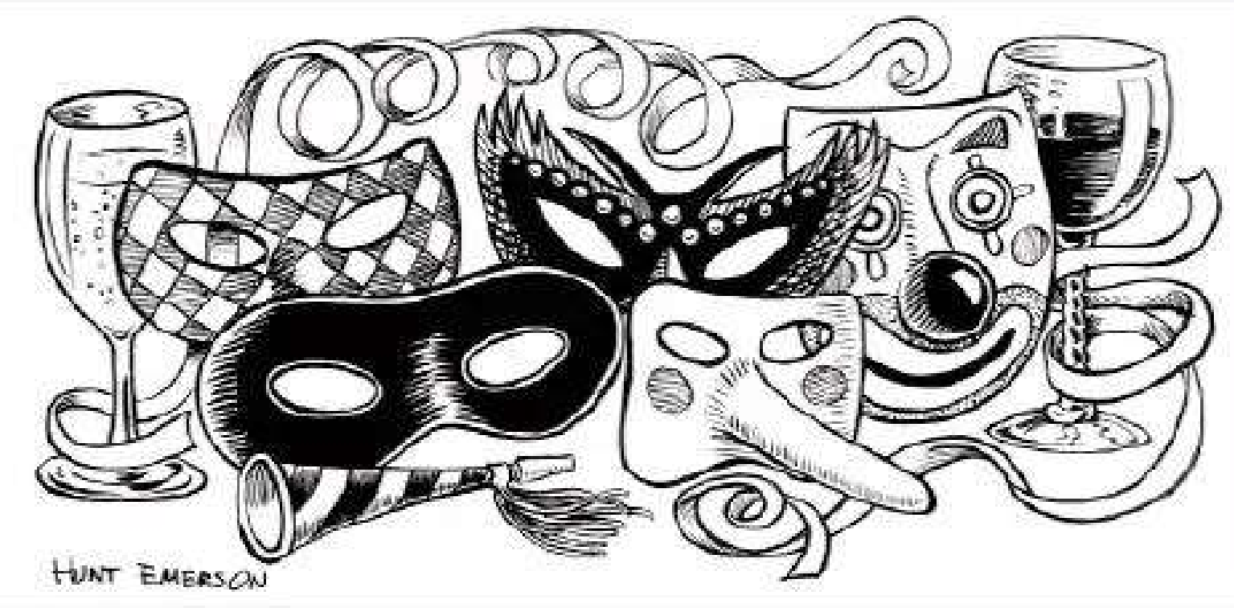
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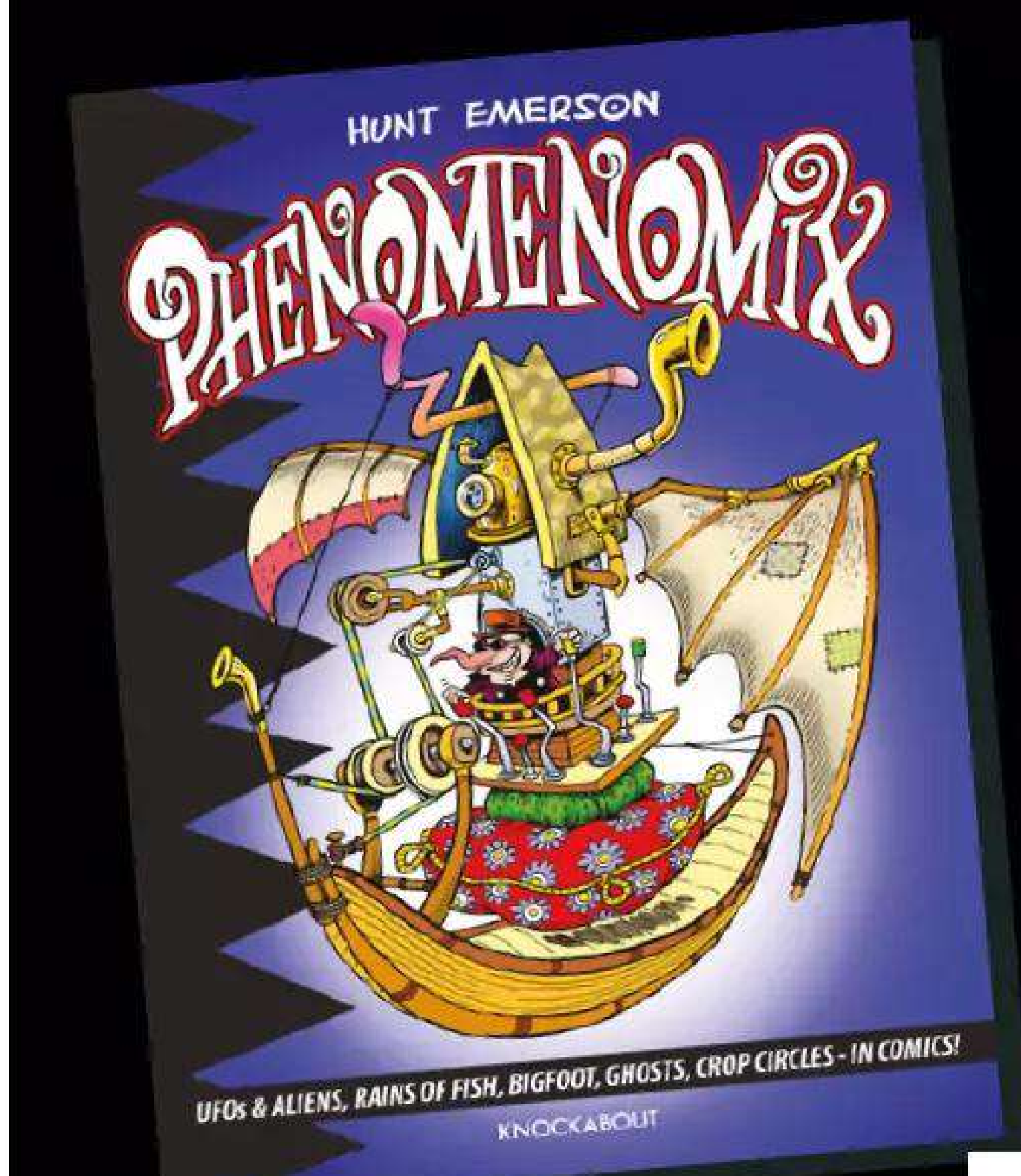
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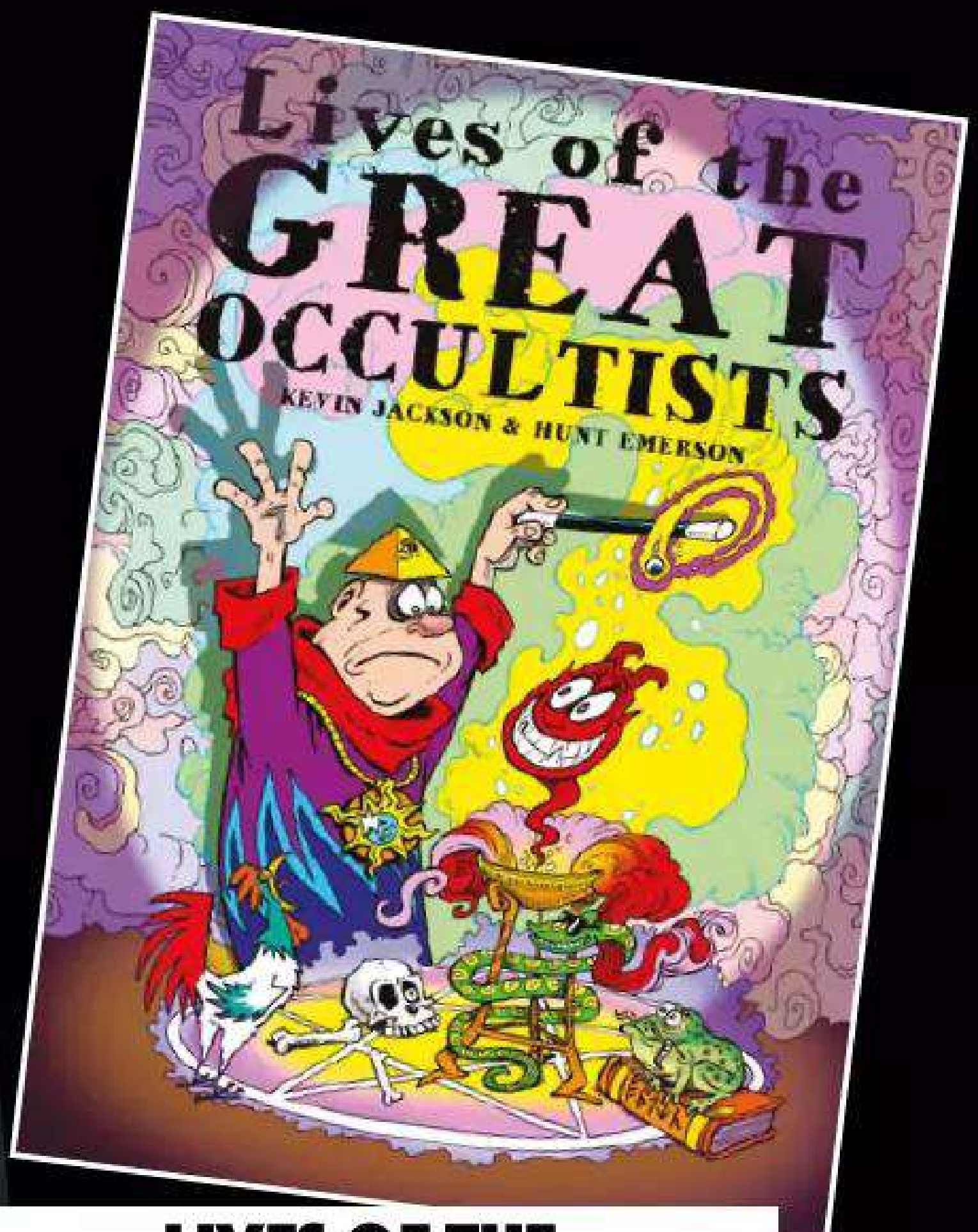
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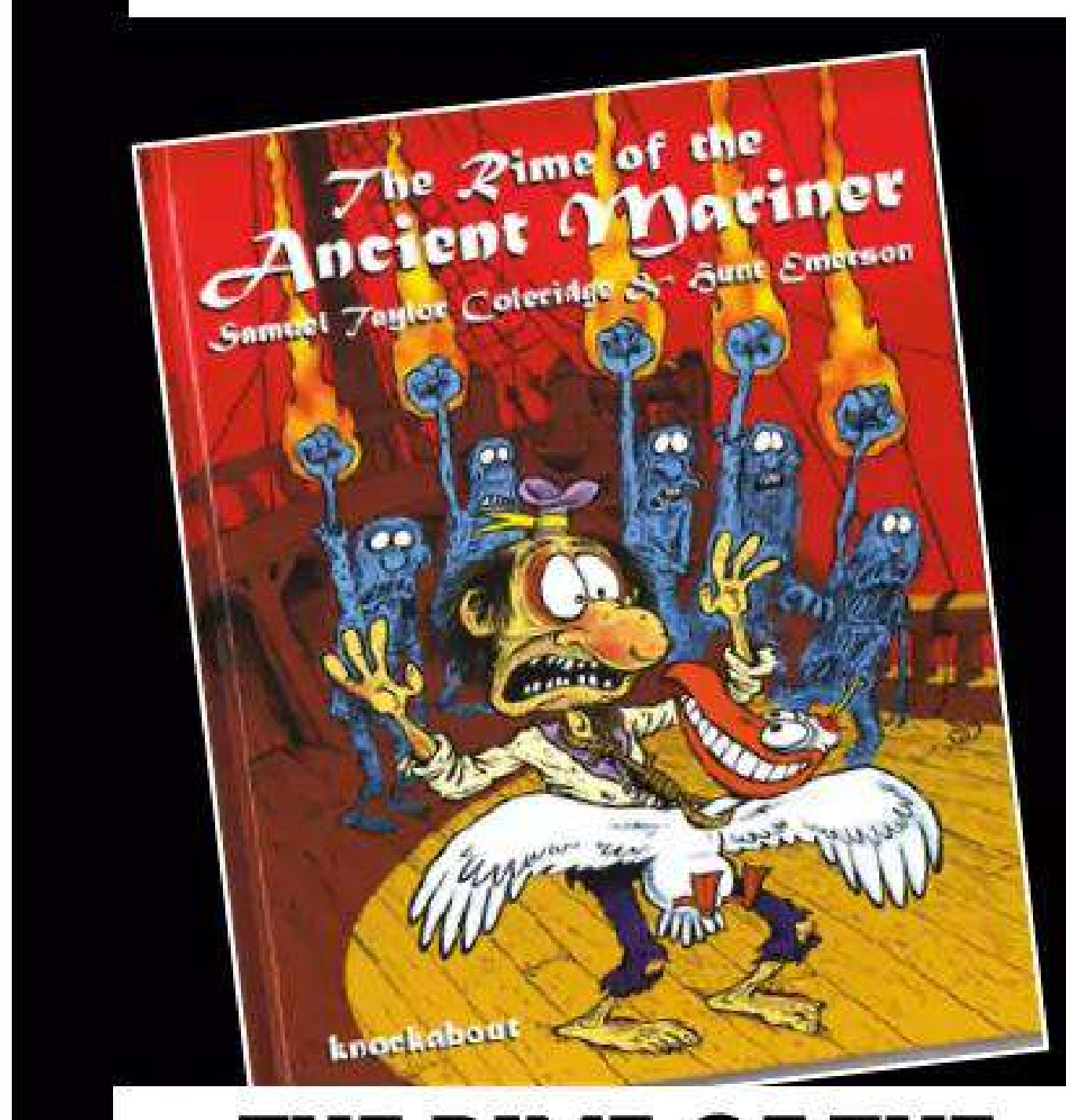
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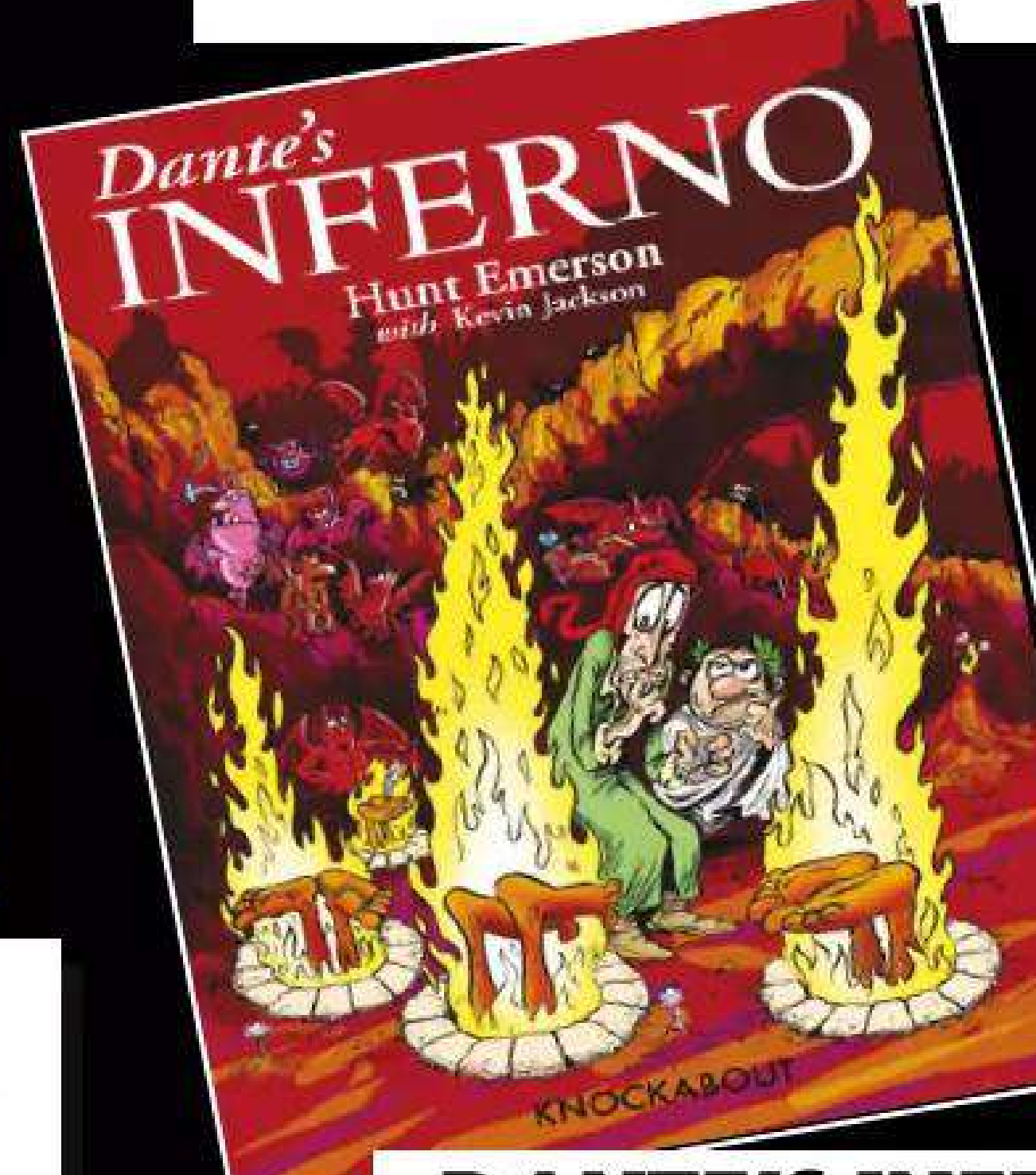
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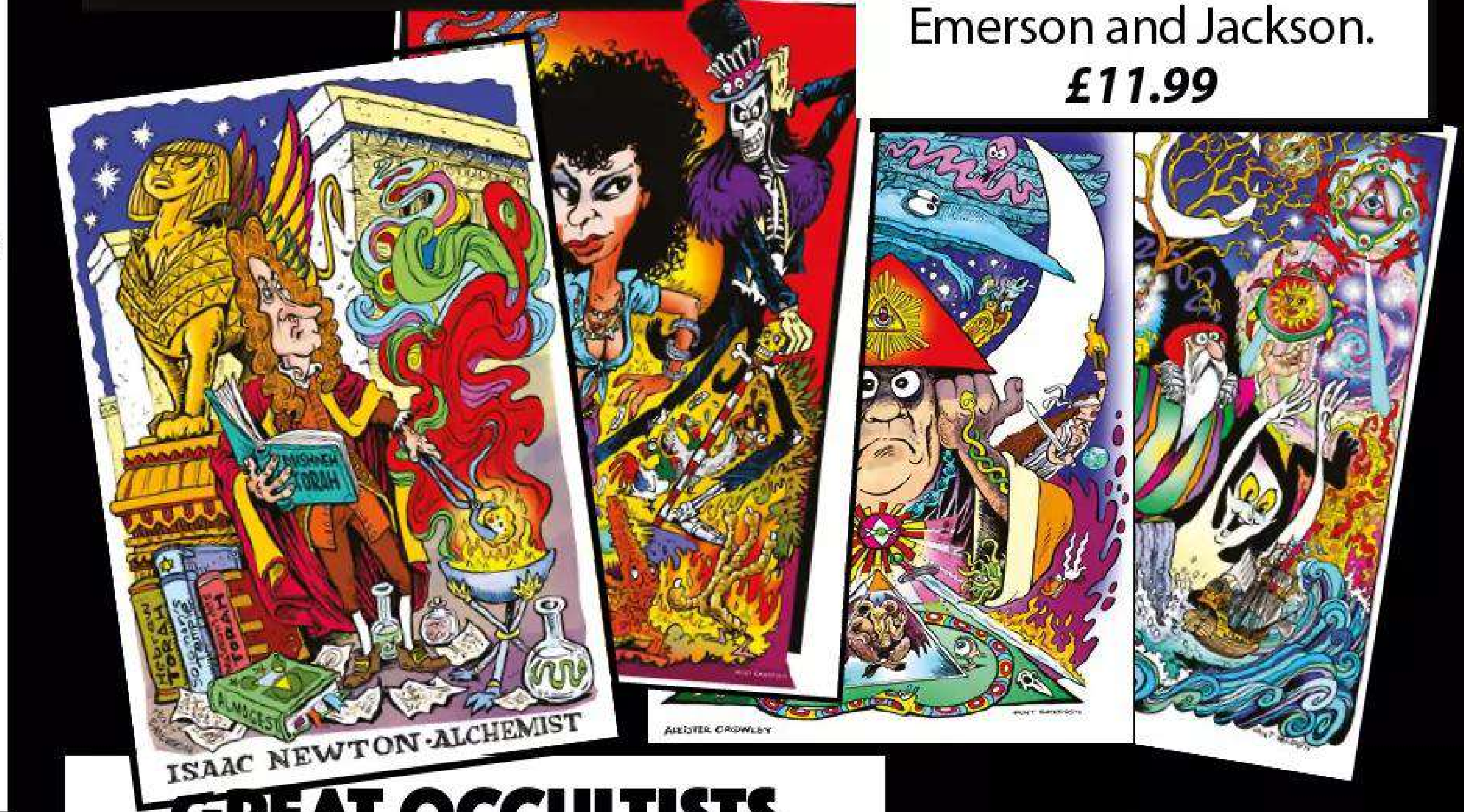
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A DIGEST OF THE WORLDWIDE WEIRD

STRANGE DAYS

MAGIC BULLETS

Sixty years after the assassination of President Kennedy, new allegations continue to surface

The 22nd of November 2023 saw the 60th anniversary of the assassination of President John F Kennedy in Dealy Plaza, Dallas, Texas, and as with all major anniversaries of the event, it prompted new revelations. Given the passing of time, those who were directly involved on the day, and even those who were watching, are now few in number, so any chance of additional in-person testimony becomes less and less likely. This, though, is what prompted 88-year-old Paul Landis to finally put his account of the day on record in a book, *Final Witness*. He says: "There's no goal at this point. I just think it had been long enough that I needed to tell my story."

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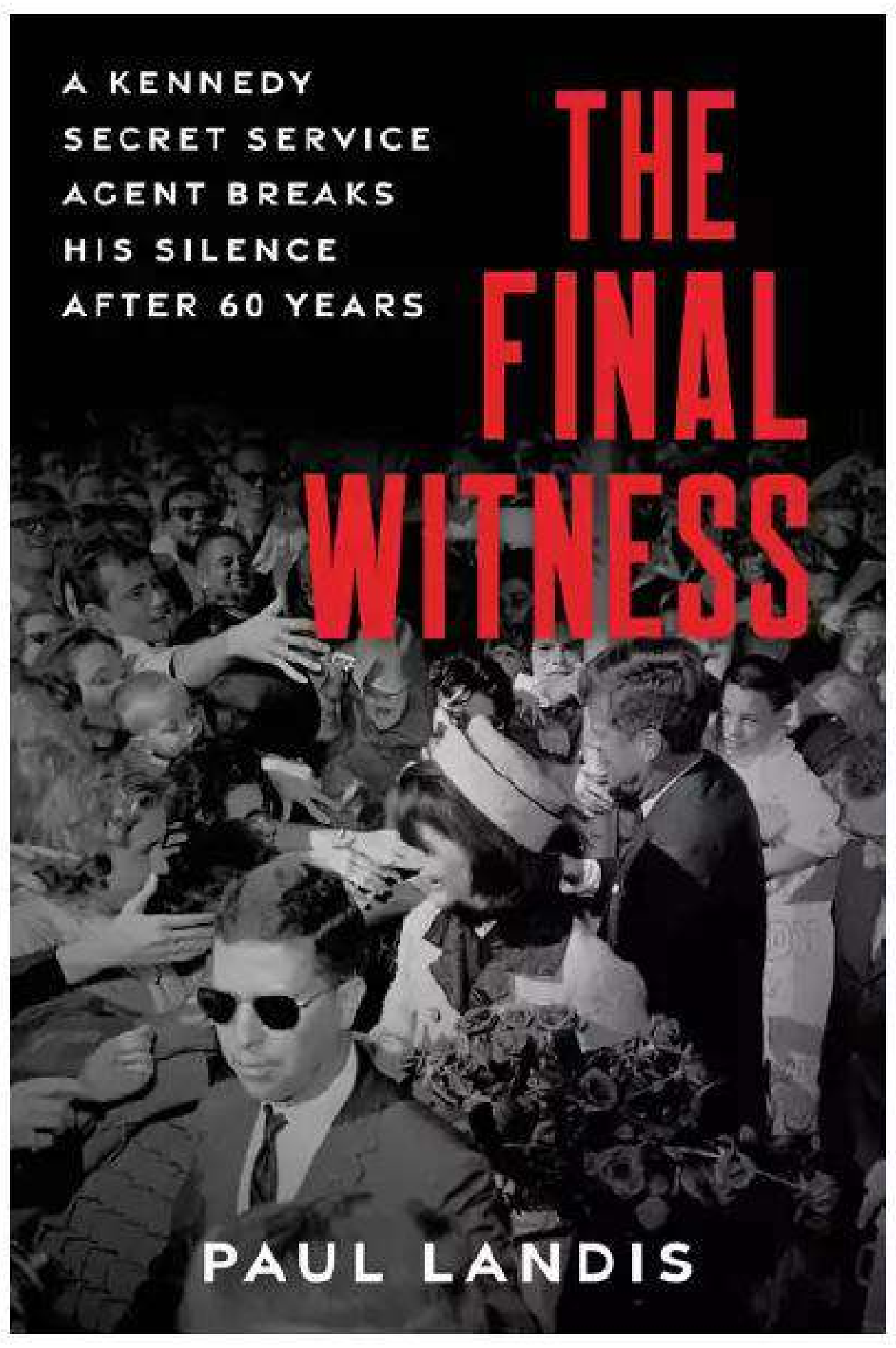
LEFT: President Kennedy, Jacqueline Kennedy, Nellie Connally and Texas Governor John Connally minutes before the assassination. **BELOW**: John Landis, in dark glasses, on the cover of his book *The Final Witness*.


A KENNEDY SECRET SERVICE AGENT BREAKS HIS SILENCE AFTER 60 YEARS
THE FINAL WITNESS
PAUL LANDIS

Landis was one of the Secret Service agents on the running board of the Kennedy car, feet away from the President when the bullets struck, and a key player in the confused aftermath. What he recalls challenges at least part of the official Warren Commission account of the assassination. One of the most contentious of the Commission's findings related to what has become known as the "Magic Bullet". This was a copper-jacketed 6.5mm bullet that the Commission concluded had hit the president from behind, going straight through his throat and out the other side to hit John Connally, then Governor of Texas, who was sitting in the front of the President's car. Despite having already torn through Kennedy's neck, the bullet still somehow managed to enter Connally's right shoulder, strike his rib, exit under his right nipple, and continue through his right wrist and into his left thigh. It also appeared almost undamaged when it was found after falling from Connally's stretcher at the hospital where he and Kennedy were taken. Both the amount of damage this single bullet supposedly inflicted, and its suspiciously pristine state have done much to encourage the subsequent thicket of conspiracy theory that has grown up around Kennedy's death. Landis's account claims to throw light on this contested projectile.

What Landis claims is that after the motorcade reached Parkland Hospital, he noticed two bullet fragments in a pool of blood on the car floor. He fingered one, then put it back, and, while doing so, noticed a further bullet "sitting on the back seat ledge, where the cushion meets the metal on the car" – he thought this had struck the president, but had not gone far into Kennedy's back before "popping back out" as he was removed from the car. As the vehicle was left unguarded, Landis worried that the intact bullet might be lost or be stolen by a souvenir seeker, so he picked it up. He intended to hand it to a senior agent, but in the confusion ended up putting it on Kennedy's stretcher instead. "I thought, well, this is the perfect place to leave the bullet. It's an important piece of evidence and this was the opportunity to leave it," he said. Landis was expecting it to be found by the doctors during an autopsy, but in fact it was later found by a member of hospital staff moving an empty stretcher, believed to be Connally's, which bumped against another in the hall, causing a bullet to fall to the floor. Quite how it ended up on this other stretcher is unclear, as Landis says he placed it on Kennedy's. The bullet was then mistakenly concluded to have come from Connally's body, resulting in the Warren Commission report saying it had "eliminated President Kennedy's stretcher as a source of the bullet" because Kennedy had remained on his stretcher until placed in his coffin, providing no opportunity for the bullet to shake loose. Landis left the Secret Service less than a year later, and was never interviewed by the Warren Commission, but handed in two written statements, both of which are contradicted by his recent revelation. He explains this by saying that he was in shock and suffering from sleep deprivation at the time he filed the reports. As to why he left it so long to correct the record, Landis says, "I didn't want to talk about it. I was afraid. I started to think, did I do something wrong? There was a fear that I might have done something wrong and I shouldn't talk about it." The location in which the bullet was found by Landis suggests that it cannot have been the one to have inflicted the wounds on both Connally and Kennedy, so adding credibility to the idea that a second shooter was involved; although Landis himself does not hold that view, and still believes Oswald killed Kennedy with three bullets, acting alone.

> *He noticed two bullet fragments in a pool of blood on the car floor*

Inevitably, Landis's story has

VEGAN VAMPIRE?

Was Vlad the Impaler a non-meat eater?

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BACK FROM EXTINCTION

The unexpected return of the golden mole

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TEAR THE ROOF OFF

A rare case of a meteorite trashing a car

PAGE 24

fuelled conspiracy theories, as has the latest release of official documents on the assassination. In 1992 a law was passed mandating the release of all documents relating to Kennedy's death, apart from those that referred to living individuals, could compromise national security, or referred to foreign powers. Many were released, but thousands were held back, to be reviewed every five years by the sitting President for subsequent release. Trump and Biden have both reviewed the dwindling stash and have still not released them all, despite Trump loudly proclaiming he would; as at this date few participants remain alive and there is likely to be little that will compromise security or cause problems with other nations, this adds to the belief that there is something to hide. One theory that both Landis's tale and the continued retention of documents potentially supports is one raised on the 50th anniversary. This suggests that the second gunman was actually a hungover Secret Service agent named George Hickey, who was in the car behind, armed with a rifle on which he wasn't trained, and in the panic accidentally fired the shot that disastrously blew the president's head off. It would certainly explain why the autopsy results were tampered with, why bullet fragments were taken by the Secret Service and later went missing, and why the Warren Commission was strangely vague on ballistics. While 60 years after the event, the US Government would probably tolerate even the most lurid conspiracy theory being confirmed, they'd never, ever, admit one of their own agents had accidentally blown a president's brains out. *seattletimes.com, 10 Sept; theguardian.com, 11 Sept; people.com, 12 Sept; edition.cnn.com, 14 Sept; washingtonpost.com, 21* Nov 2023.

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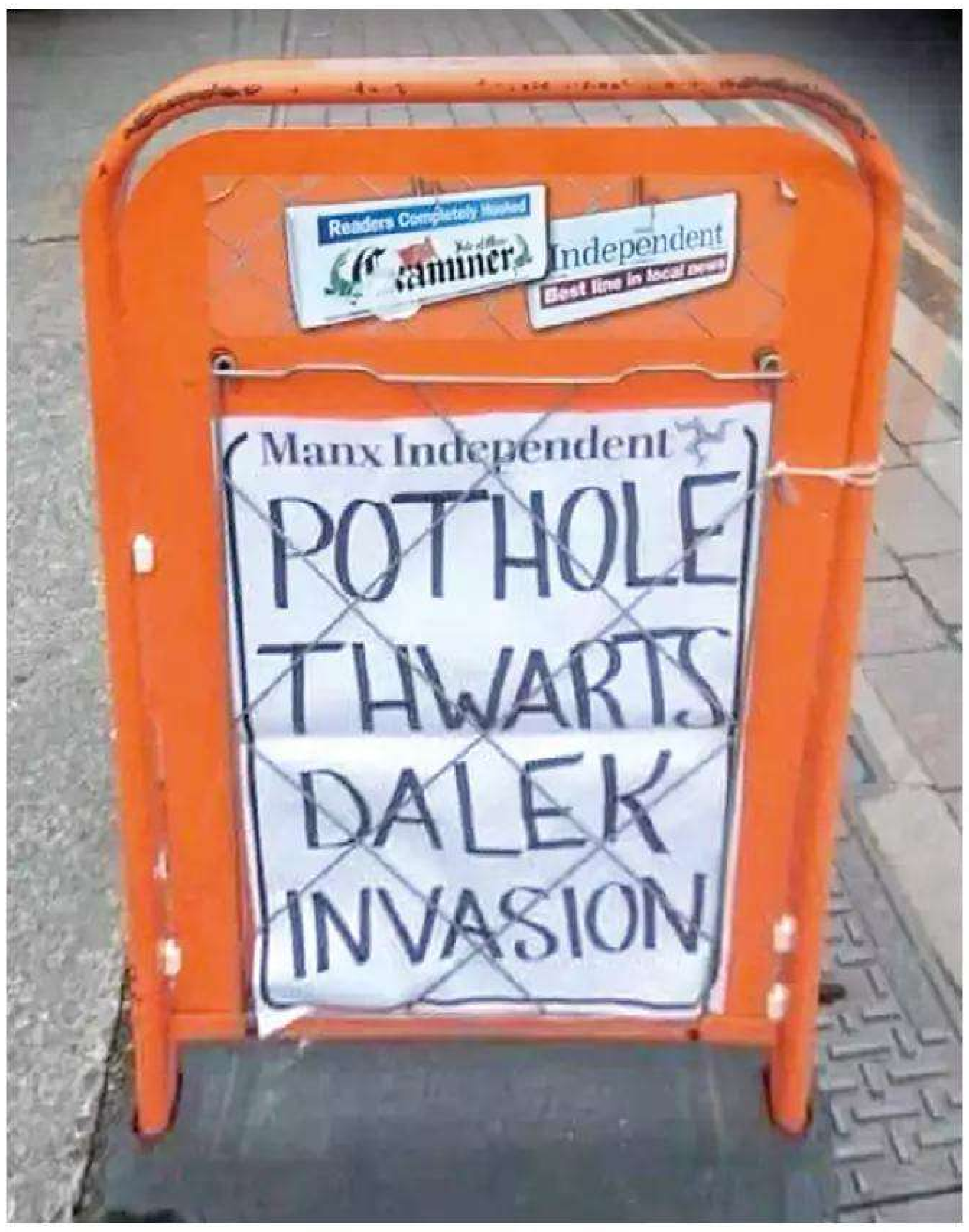
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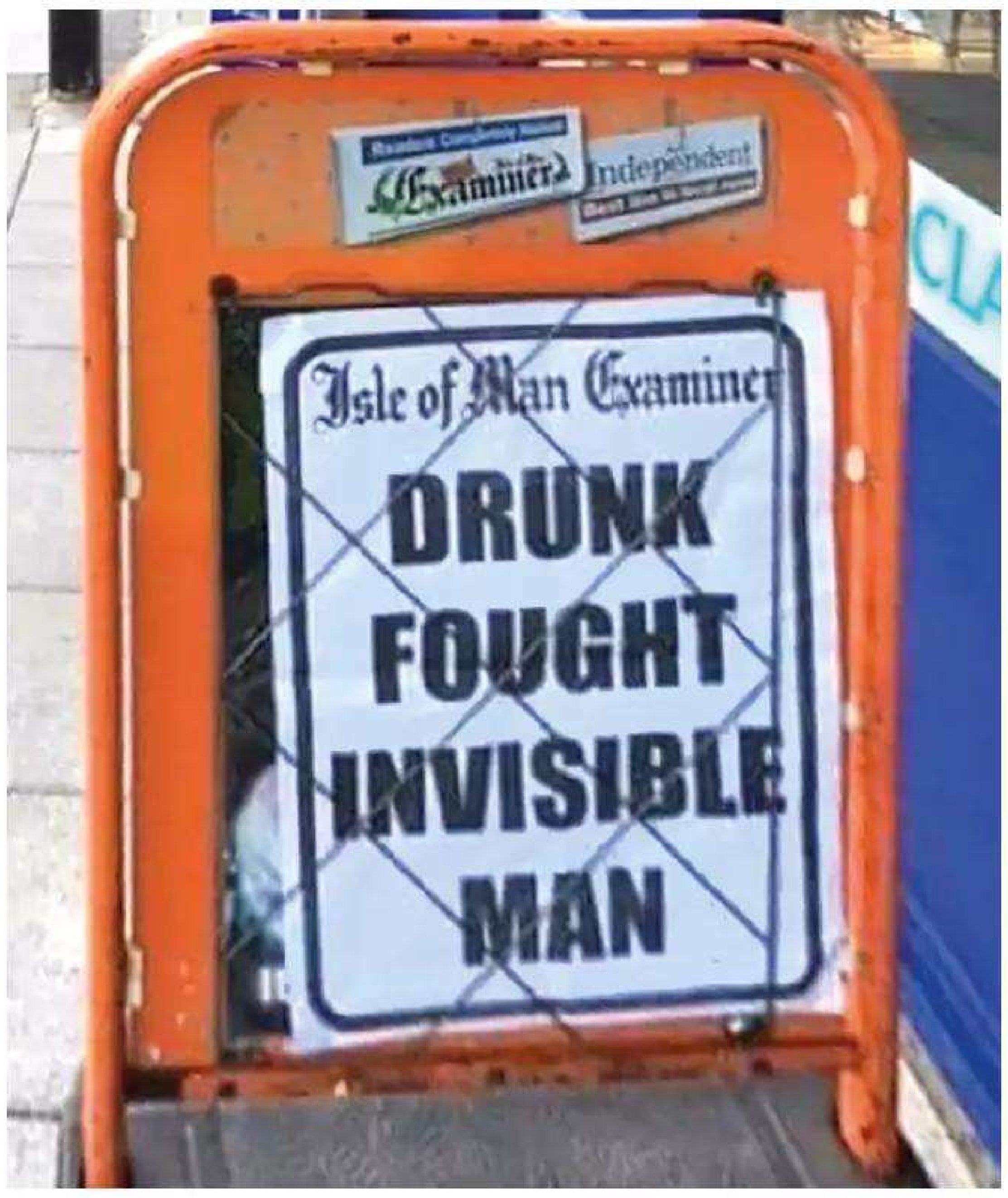
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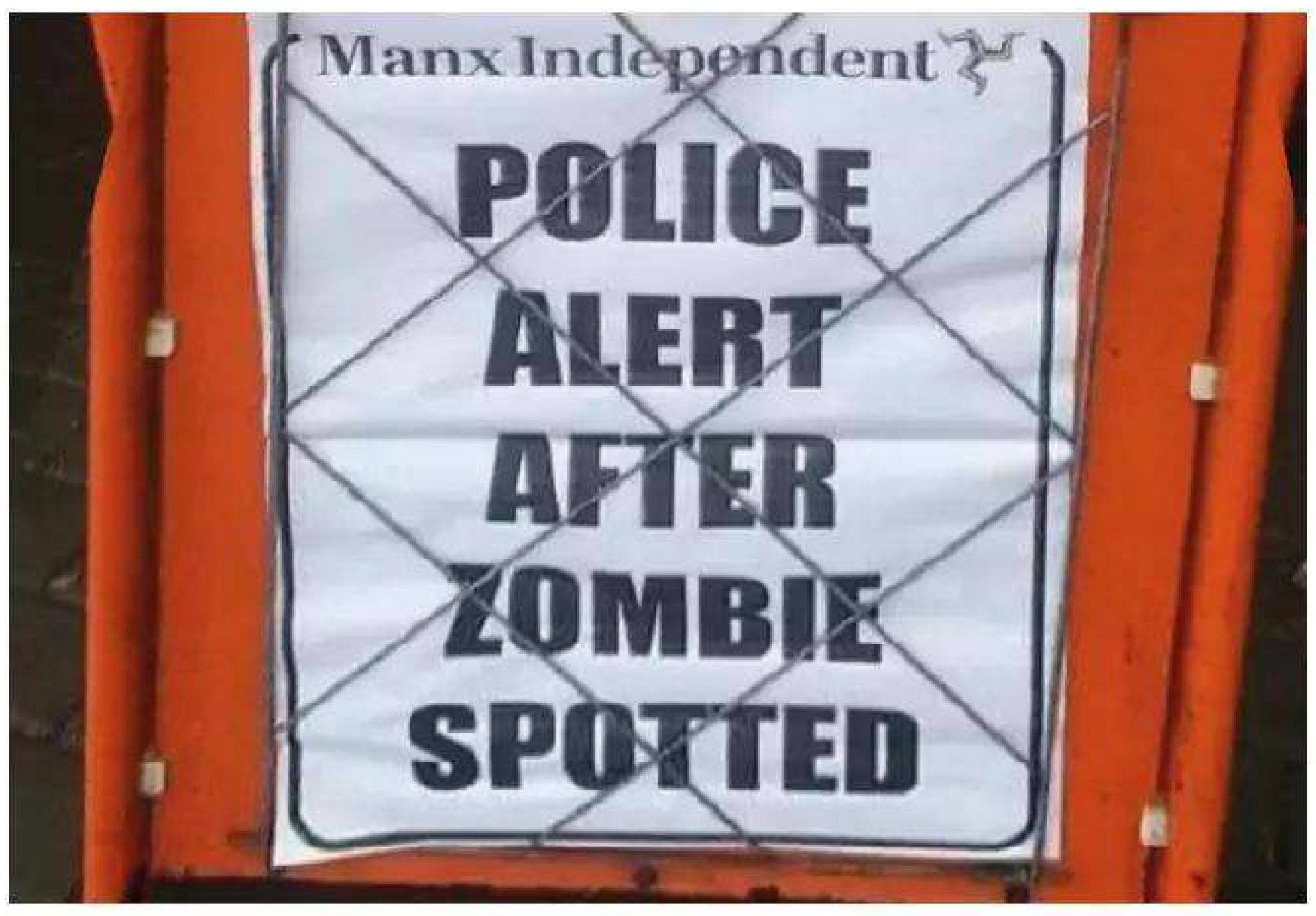
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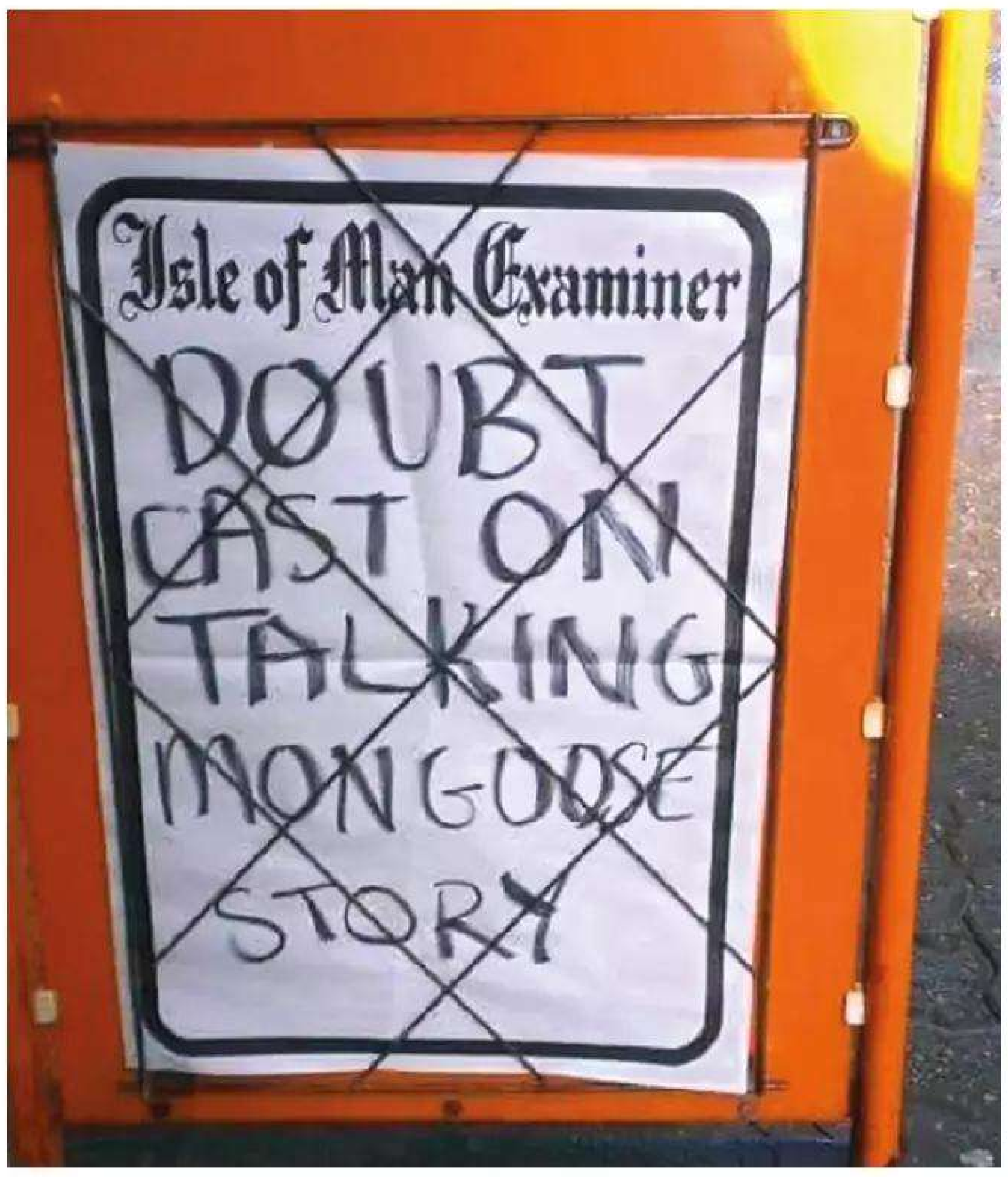
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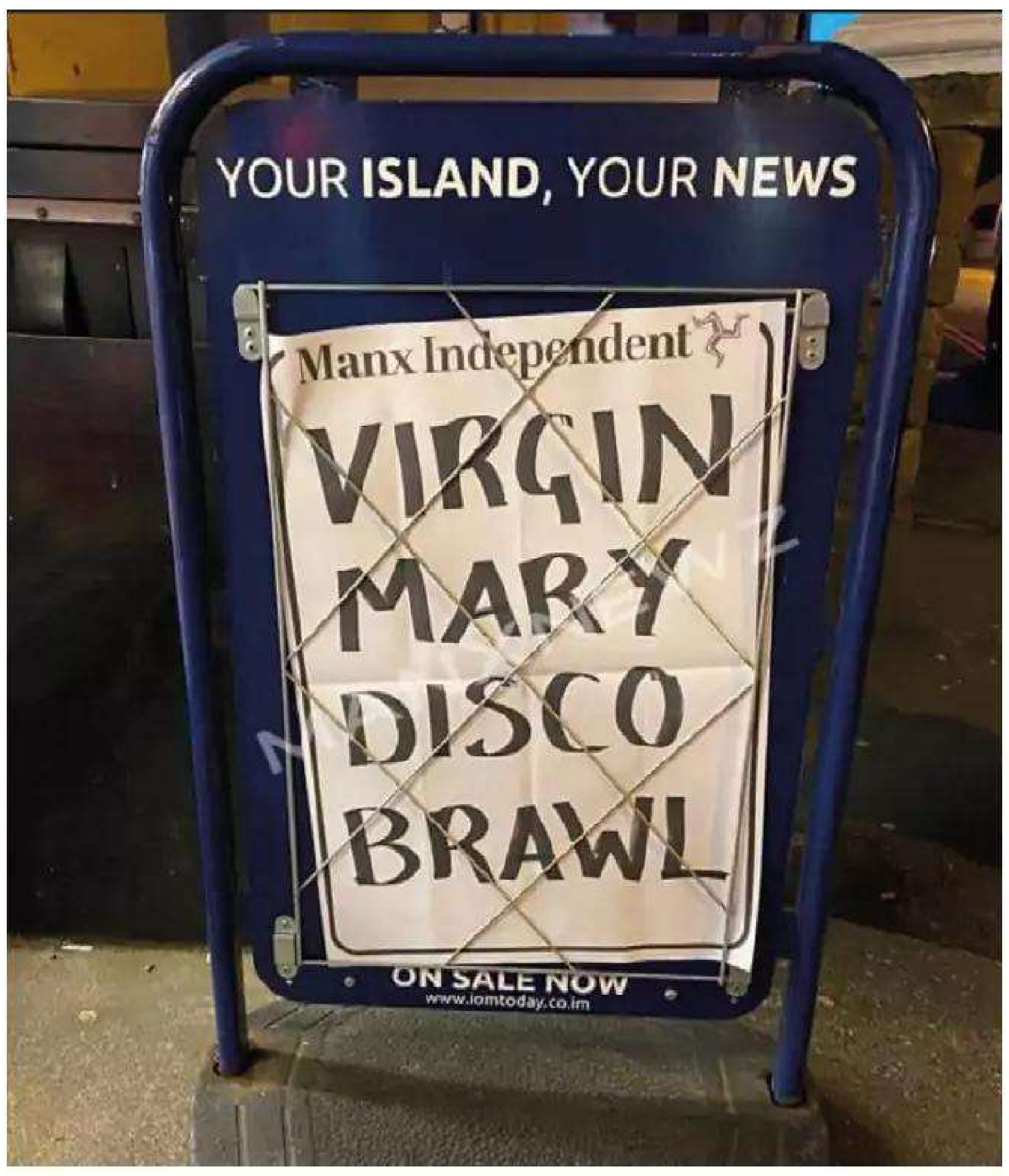
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SHORT OF A PICNIC?

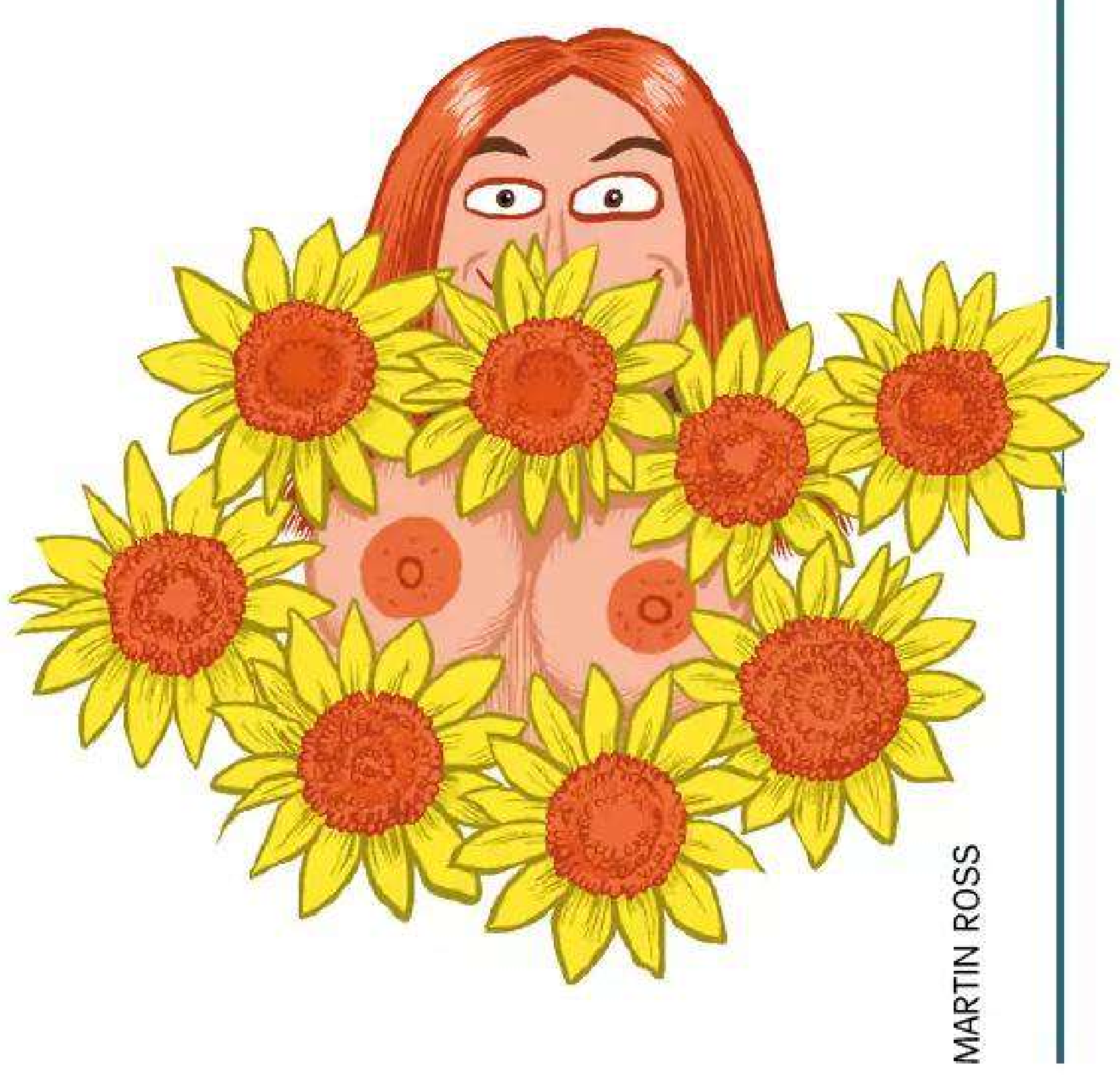
People living along the B184 between Königsborn and Heyrothsberge in Germany are being plagued by a phantom sandwich-thrower who hurls foil-wrapped sarnies from a car before 6am on most weekdays. Fillings vary – they can be cheese, salami, or sausage – and most are untouched, although some have had a single bite taken out of them. Annoyed residents have found them in their gardens, as well as on the local football pitch, leading club chairman Holger Becker to say: “We do everything here on a voluntary basis and maintain our place ourselves. It’s very annoying for us.” *euronews.com, 20 Sept 2023.*

SPEARED!

Driving through San Antonio, Texas, Shavone Canales, 36, had a narrow escape when a five-foot spear slammed through her car windscreen and embedded itself in the steering column. Canales said the attack was “completely random” and happened when she was “going 40, 45 miles per hour” shattering the glass inches from her face. “I heard an explosion, and I ducked down, and when I looked up, a whole spear was there,” she said. Police have no suspects but are seeking the spear chucker for aggravated assault with a deadly weapon. *dailymail.co.uk, 22 Aug 2023.*

SUNNY DELIGHT

The owners of Stoke Fruit Farm on Hayling Island in Hampshire have asked visitors not to strip naked and pose for photos in their sunflower fields after six incidents of public nudity, some in front of children, were reported. “It’s a really happy and fun place and it does give you that empowering feeling, but it’s about the people around and being respectful of that,” said owner Nette Petley. *edition.cnn.com, 18 Aug 2023.*



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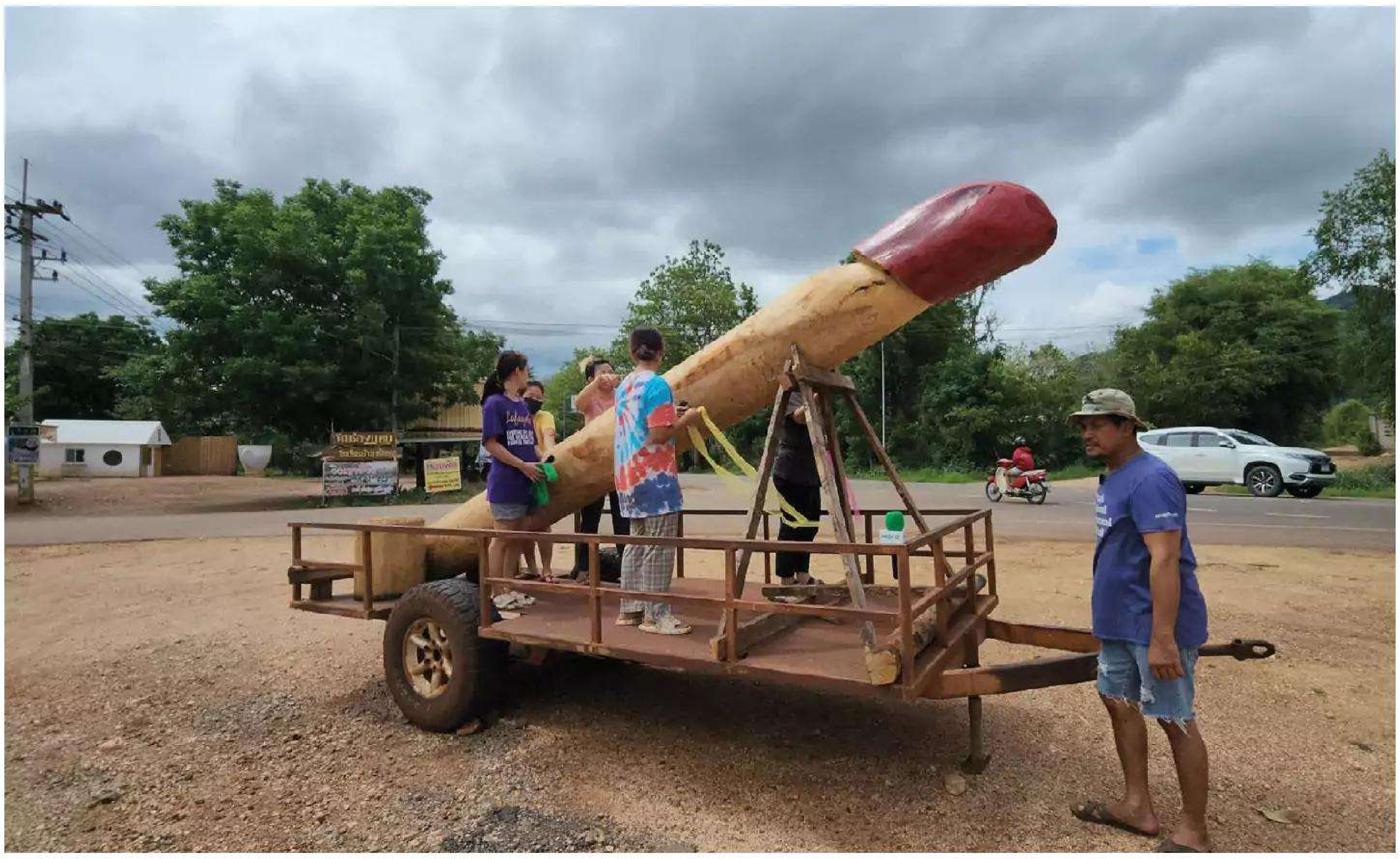
RELIGION NEWS

Controversial statues in Thailand and a prophecy-fulfilling fox in Jerusalem



FACEBOOK / KANCHANABURI NEWS

ABOVE: The giant phallus that residents of Thailand’s Kanchanaburi province believe will bring rain – if it is aimed correctly.

GENITAL KARMA

The Dhamma Chot Hirun religious shrine in the Pak Chong district of Thailand found itself under investigation by the police, the National Office of Buddhism and the local village chief because it was encouraging followers in search of good fortune to apply gold leaf to large vagina and penis statues. The shrine is operated by a nun named Naowaratkotchaporn Simethawong, also known as Mother Brahmin, who says that the rituals are based on ancient astrological texts known as “Mahanarm” in which the body parts symbolise the origin and abundance of life. Naowaratkotchaporn explained that the practice of paying respect to giant statues of genitals dates back 5,000 years to the Indus Valley Civilisation of India and that the rituals are accompanied by traditional teachings emphasising the need for women to pay respect to men, particularly their husbands. She claims they are particularly effective at remedying misfortune for women who have undergone abortions, suffered poor health or experienced financial hardship, saying, “I established this premises as a sanctuary for distressed women who are uncertain about their path in life. Another objective is to resolve and eliminate all karma… I believe that the vagina and penis represent sources of distress.” The inspection resulted in Naowaratkotchaporn being permitted to continue the rituals at the shrine under the supervision of the village chief on the condition that she relocated a large Buddha statue that was situated close to the giant genitals, to avoid potential disrespect to Buddhism. *thethaiger.com, 22 May 2023.*

> *The rain would only fall in the area indicated by the tip of the penis*

RAIN-MAKING PENIS

Elsewhere in Thailand, in the Sai Yok district of Kanchanaburi province, another giant penis caused a stir. Here locals paraded an enormous wooden phallus around the area while praying to Devas, angel-like entities in Buddhism, as part of a ritual to summon rain. Wooden phallic amulets known as *Palad Khik* are often carried in Thailand for protection against ghosts and evil spirits, and to bring mercy and popularity to the person carrying them. These, though, are small enough to be carried in people’s pockets; the one in Sai Yok weighed 600kg (1,323lb) and had its own trailer. “We wanted the Devas in heaven to pay attention to us and realised that we needed rain, so we crafted the huge wooden penis to make the Devas clearly notice it,” explained local farmer Manote, who said that the lack of rain was causing difficulties as the majority of locals made a living from agriculture, cultivating cassava and corn. Manote claimed that the ritual worked, with rain falling shortly after it was performed, although not on any of the local plantations. This, he explained was because the rain would only fall in the areas indicated by the tip of the penis, so there had to be frequent adjustments to it to guide the rain to the right locations. After the successful invocation, the penis was paraded round the community to celebrate and express gratitude to the Devas. Elsewhere in Thailand, rituals to summon rain can involve parading a cat, from either the Thai Si Sawat or Korat cat breeds, around the affected area, or by holding a rocket festival at which a huge number of fireworks are sent skywards. *thethaiger.com, 14 Jun 2023.*

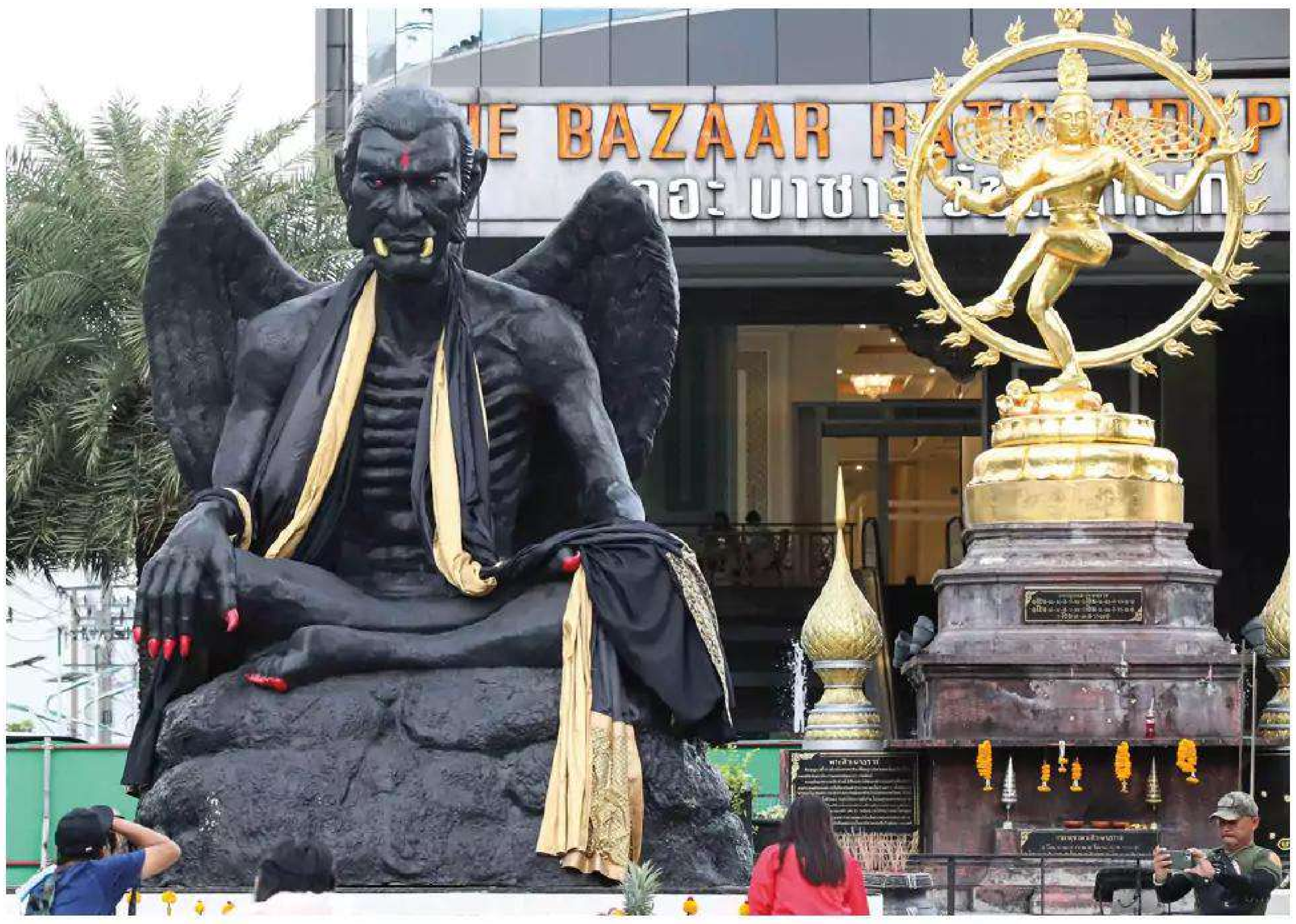
KRU KAI KAEW

Cats were at the centre of a social media storm in Thailand after followers of Kru Kai Kaew, a deity portrayed with wings, pointed fangs, and talons, allegedly appealed online for kittens and puppies to be sacrificed to him. This was supposed to be for a ritual that involves killing the animals in front of the deity's statue to reveal lucky lottery numbers. However, Kru Kai Kaew's followers said that rumours of such practices were a smear campaign designed to tarnish the deity's image, pointing out that most of the furore was generated by unidentifiable and counterfeit social media accounts. There was also debate about the wisdom of venerating Kru Kai Kaew, with some alleging it was done out of fear, not respect, as he resembles a malevolent entity, not a benign one. His origins are shrouded in mystery, with followers claiming that he originated with a Thai monk's meditation journey in Cambodia's Angkor Wat, where he claimed to have encountered Kru Kai Kaew's soul. The monk then created a statue depicting this soul, which was passed on to another monk, Suchart Rattnasuk, who went on to spread the image that has been passed down the generations. However, historical records show no sign of Kru Kai Kaew during the Khmer Empire, when he is supposed to have originated. The deity's followers had previously caused a massive traffic jam in Bangkok city centre by trying to transport a giant statue along a main road, only to find it was too big to go through an underpass, which started rumours that this was a stunt to gain public attention for Kru Kai Kaew. *thethaiger.com, 16 Aug 2023.*

END TIMES FOX

The sighting of a fox on the southern wall of the Temple Mount in Jerusalem during Tisha Be'Av, the day that marks the destruction of the Temples, went viral on social media in Israel as a sign of a prophecy coming true. Related in Tractate Makkot, this links to another prophecy by Uriah, which says "Therefore, for your sake Zion shall be ploughed as a field, and Jerusalem shall become rubble, and the Temple Mount as the high places of a forest (where foxes are found)". That in turn opens the way for the fulfilment of a third prophecy, this time by the Prophet Zecharia, which says "There shall yet be elderly men and elderly women sitting in the streets of Jerusalem" and is taken to mean that the Temple will be rebuilt.

ZUMA PRESS, INC. / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO



ABOVE: Believers pay homage to a large sculpture of Kru Kai Kaew installed in front of the Bazaar Ratchadaphisek Hotel in Bangkok. **BELOW**: The fox spotted on the southern wall of Jerusalem's Temple Mount.

Even before the current conflict, tensions were high, with Hamas militants objecting to Israelis being allowed to pray on the Temple Mount close to the Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock, among the holiest places of Islam. These occupy part of the area that would be required by any new Temple. Some Israeli right-wingers see the conflict with Hamas as opening the way for Temple reconstruction, while so called Third Temple groups have been collaborating with fundamentalist Christians in the US to breed pure red heifers. The sacrifice of these heifers is required for any new Temple as their ashes must purify the building before it can be used. Several apparently pure red calves have been imported to Israel recently, and one has been born there (see **FT373:44-47, 425:49, 436:24**). The Jerusalem-based Temple Institute is assiduously examining them for any blemish, as even a single non-red hair makes them ineligible for sacrifice. Rabbi Yitzchak Mamo, from the Third Temple group, Uvne Jerusalem, says he has planned a ceremony for Passover 2024 to slaughter the imported heifers, and has bought a plot of land overlooking the Temple Mount to use for that purpose, and to begin preparations for the Third Temple's construction. For Judaism, the reconstruction of the Temple will usher in the Messianic Era, a time that includes the return of biblical laws of purity, thus allowing for truly holy life. For Evangelical Christians, it would herald the End Times, the return of Jesus to Earth and the Rapture, which is why they have been enthusiastically collaborating with the Third Temple groups to breed the red heifers. It has been suggested on social media that one of Hamas's aims for its incursion into Israel was to find and kill the heifers before ceremonial slaughter can take place, preventing any of this occurring. *jpost.com, 27 Jul; forward.com, 8 Sept 2023.*

SIDELINES

FIERY COINCIDENCE

The suspicious fire that destroyed the famed Crooked House pub in Walsall, West Midlands, resulted in unexpected media attention for the Country and Western duo scheduled to play there on the night of the inferno. Sally Rae Morris and Stephen Marks, who perform as Gasoline and Matches, described the situation as an "awful coincidence". *Shropshirestar.com, 7 Aug 2023.*

NOT A FRANKFURTER?

Honkey Donky, a burger bar in Rafaela, Argentina, has caused offense by offering "Adolf" cheese and bacon covered french fries as a side to their "Ana Frank" hamburger. Their menu also contained options named after Genghis Khan, Mao Zedong, and Benito Mussolini. After public outrage and formal complaints from the town's Jewish community, the eatery apologised and promised to rename items after "defenders of peace and human rights" like "Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Dalai Lama, Barak Obama, Teresa de Calcuta, Carlos Mujica, Nelson Mandela, Mijail Gorbachov, Juan Pablo II, among others" (many sics). *vice.com, 7 Aug 2023.*

TOILET TROUBLE

Emergency services were called to an outhouse in Otsego County, Michigan, after passers-by heard screams for help. They discovered that the cries came from the bottom of a pit toilet in the building, where they found a woman trapped. She had dropped her Apple watch down the toilet and climbed in to retrieve it, but then got stuck. Rescuers removed the toilet and lifted the woman out using a long strap. *boingboing.net, 21 Sept 2023.*

BEAVER, DAMN

An unnamed man in Montmorency County, Michigan, used a large block of Tannerite explosive to blow up a beaver dam on a creek that ran through his property. Police, who were alerted by neighbours to the explosion, found that the man had succeeded in flooding both his own and neighbouring properties and arrested him for destroying a beaver dam without a permit, after which he admitted that he "did not think about what would happen to the water". *mlive.com, 16 Feb 2023.*

SIDELINES...

OWN GOAL

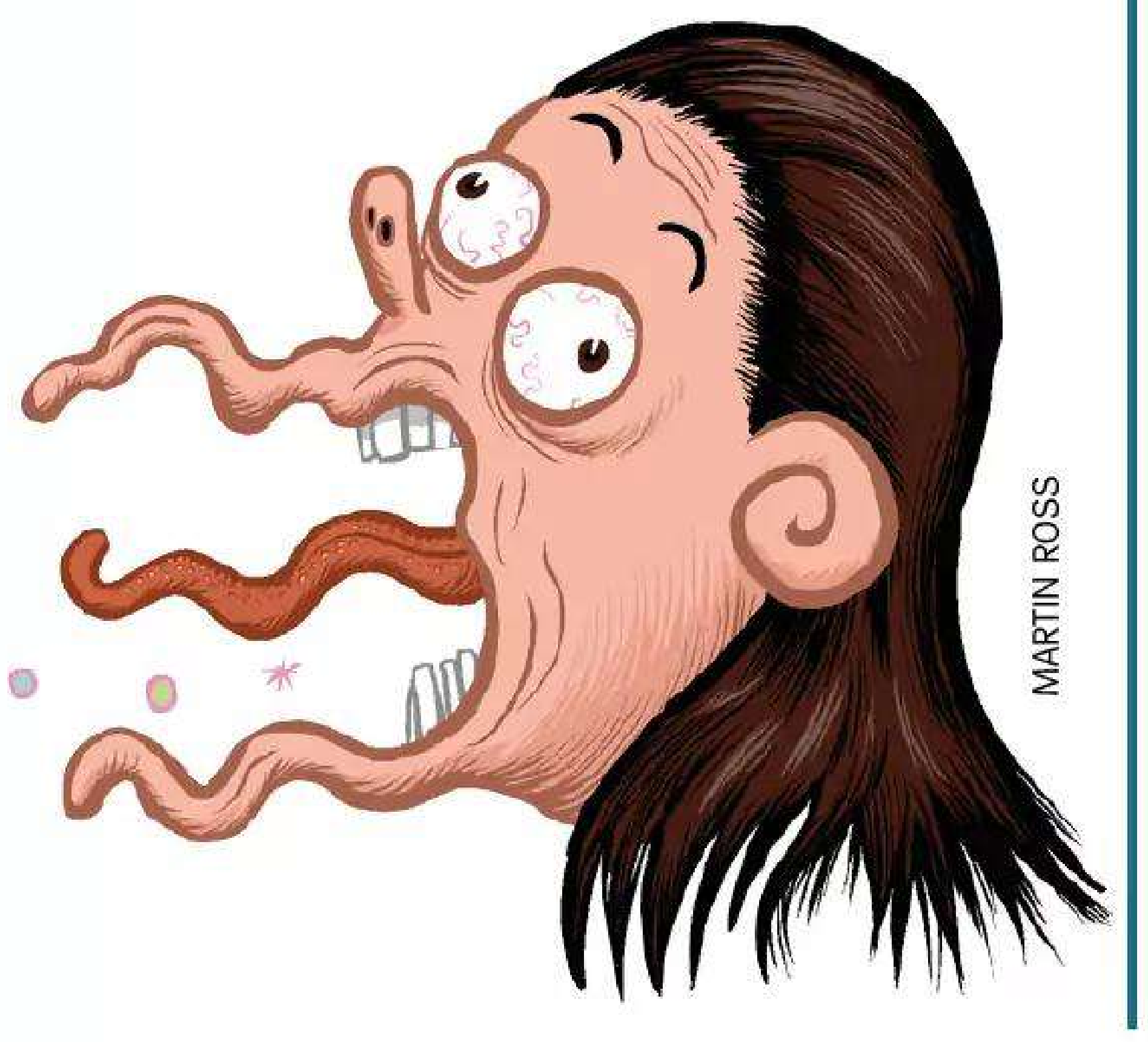
Craig Everitt, 33, led a gang that tried to blow up ATM machines across the West Midlands to steal cash. They failed in every one of their six attempts, and during the final one Everitt accidently pocket dialled 999 on his phone, giving the police a complete recording of proceedings. They traced the number, matched the recording to CCTV from the site and arrested all four would-be thieves. *birminghammail.co.uk, 1 Feb 2023.*

DEMON DRIVER

Jan Lepley of Decatur Township, Pennsylvania, was in her kitchen with her cousins when a massive crash shook her house. A car had veered off a nearby road, driven across a pasture, hit an embankment and become airborne, flying over the car in Lepley's drive and embedding itself in a first-floor bedroom, missing the family below. Police found that the driver, Evan Thomas Miller, 20, had crashed deliberately as he believed he was seeing demons and was one himself. He growled at officers on the scene and later bit a hospital security guard on the leg, earning himself multiple charges. *pennlive.com, 9 Aug; wjactv.com, 8 Aug 2023.*

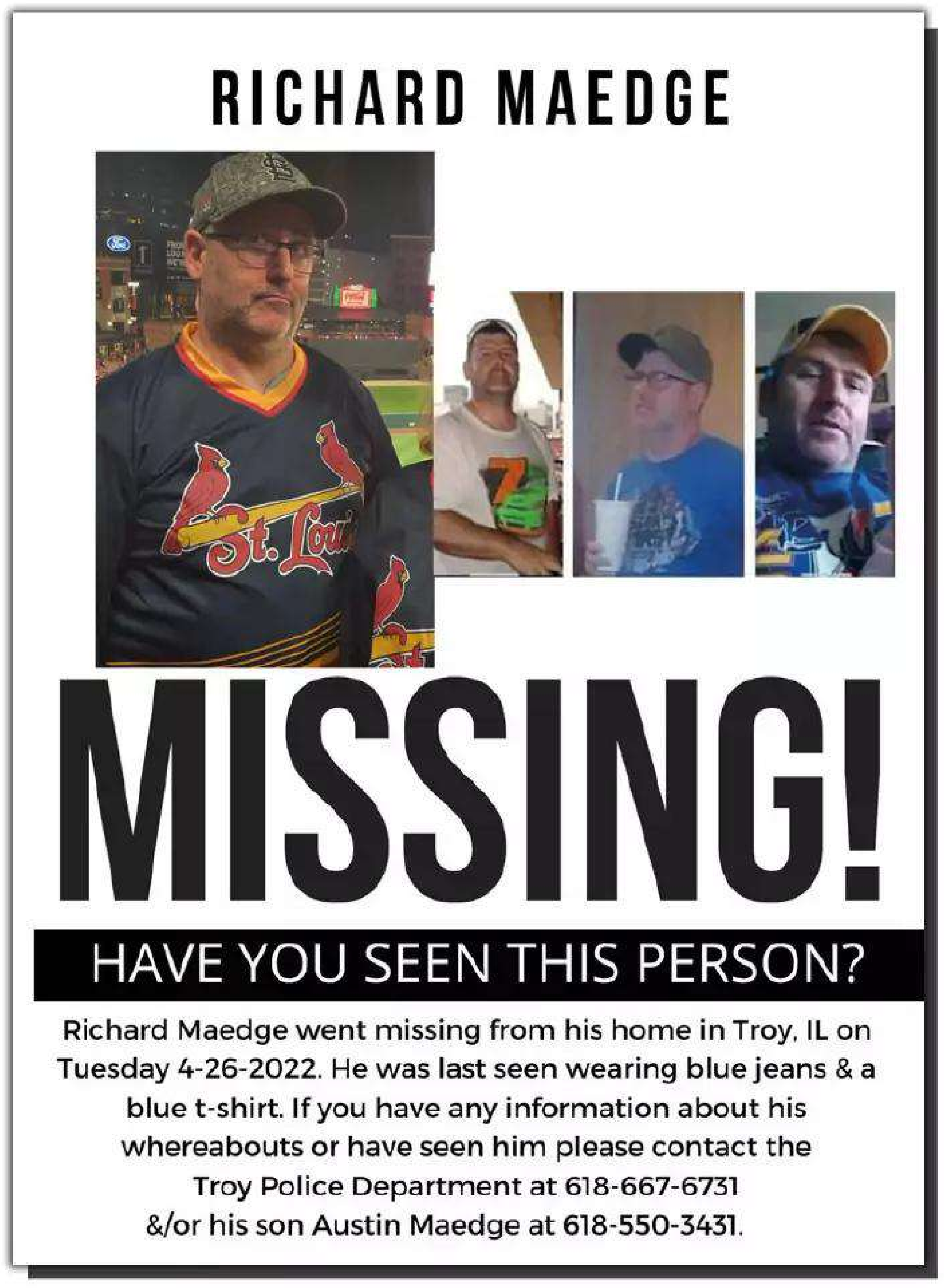
PARDON ME!

Kimberly 'Kimycola' Winter broke the Guinness world record for the loudest burp (female) that had stood for 14 years, with an eructation that came in at 107 decibels, as loud as a motorbike at full throttle. Measured in a soundproof room, Winter's belch came close to the male record too, which stands at 112.7 decibels, set by Neville Sharpe in 2021. To achieve her record, Winter experimented with various foods, settling on drinking coffee and beer with her breakfast to generate the maximum effect. *upi.com, 2 Aug 2023.*


MARTIN ROSS

GONE & FORGOTTEN

Bodies undiscovered for months and sometimes years


RICHARD MAEDGE

MISSING!

HAVE YOU SEEN THIS PERSON?

Richard Maedge went missing from his home in Troy, IL on Tuesday 4-26-2022. He was last seen wearing blue jeans & a blue t-shirt. If you have any information about his whereabouts or have seen him please contact the Troy Police Department at 618-667-6731 &/or his son Austin Maedge at 618-550-3431.

LEFT: A 'Missing' poster drawing attention to Richard Maedge's disappearance; he was actually dead in a closet at home. **BELOW**: Mike Carroll, who had been dead for over six years before his body was discovered.

Jennifer Maedge, from Troy, Illinois, reported her husband Richard missing in April 2022. He had phoned her to say he was leaving work early, but when Jennifer returned home Richard was nowhere to be found, although his car was in their driveway, and he had left his wallet, keys and cards in the house. Police searched the family home, which they described as a "hoarder home" and "sewer-like", twice, but found no sign of him. Eight months later, though, on 11 December, Jennifer finally found Richard's body when looking for Christmas decorations. His mummified remains were wedged in a closet in a storage area in the house, along with tonnes of rubbish. "I decided to put the Christmas tree up, and I was looking for a tote of Christmas ornaments, and that's when I discovered him," Jennifer said. She had reported a foul smell in the house, but police put this down to the vast accumulation of rubbish it contained, and a plumber had also repaired sewer pipes to get rid of the odour, which eventually subsided. The coroner ruled that Richard had died by suicide, and that his corpse had mummified, which is why the smell of decay had disappeared by the time he was discovered. *mirror.co.uk, 7 Mar 2023.*

- When relatives phoned, it always seemed that 81-year-old Mike Carroll was otherwise engaged – he was out, he was eating, he was unwell. Then his daughter and son-in-law, who lived with him, just stopped picking up the phone. As they were living in Kansas City, Missouri, a long way from other relatives, and amid the Covid pandemic, this did not immediately raise concerns. However, in October 2022, police were called to the family home in the Overland Park neighbourhood following reports of a dead person inside a house. There they found Carroll's decayed remains. Following an autopsy, the Johnson County Medical Examiner determined that he had died on 1 July 2016, based on data from his pacemaker, and that his corpse been kept concealed in the house for more than six years. "This is bizarre. We don't know what to make of all of it," said his cousin Janet Carroll. "We're just as lost as everybody else as to why this happened." The Social Security Administration, however, has opened a criminal investigation relating to benefit fraud. *kansascity.com, 27 Oct 2023.*

- On 13 January 2023, council workers in Mallow, County Cork, Ireland, charged with gaining access to a boarded-up property to enable pest control to deal with a suspected rat infestation, found the locks so seized up that Paul O'Donoghue resorted to kicking the door in. Inside, he found a "considerable" amount of post and leaflets piled up, so decided to do a "quick sweep of the property". Entering the bedroom, O'Donoghue said, "I could see a bed in the middle of the floor. I then saw a shape of legs under the duvet, and a coat laid on top. I realised it was a human body." He alerted colleagues, who called the Gardai. The body was taken to the morgue at Cork University Hospital, where the pathologist reported that the remains were "totally skeletal except for some mummification" and confirmed from dental records that the body was that of Timothy O'Sullivan. Gardai officers sifted through the house, finding food in the fridge dated back as far as 2001, diary entries running up to 11 January 2001 and evidence that he had been claiming job seeker's allowance from 4 October 2000. Further enquiries found that O'Sullivan had missed collecting payments on 9, 16 and 23 January 2001, after which his claim was automatically closed. This led the Gardai to conclude that he had died sometime between 9 and 23 January 2001 at the property and had lain undiscovered there for 22 years.

"As far as I know, he had told people that he was going to England," said local

ABOVE: (left to right) Sheila Ortega (left) was found in the trunk of Christopher Cater's car; Sheila Trimble (centre) may have died two hours before her famiy saw her apparently alive; Regina Michalski's body was found in a garage freezer.

councillor James Kennedy, explaining why no one had reported him missing, adding, "It's very tragic, God rest his soul. He is at peace now." *express.co.uk, 26 Oct; irishexaminer.com, 14 Jan 2023.*

- When police in Lake Charles, Louisiana, caught up with Christopher Cater, 41, he said: "I know why you are here." Officers were investigating the disappearance of Sheila Ortega, 72, who had been reported missing by relatives after they had been unable to contact her for a month and were looking for Cater as he had been seen driving the missing woman's SUV. He had, in fact, already been stopped by police while driving the car, on the day Ortega was reported missing. Officers had asked him about her whereabouts and were told that he had driven her to visit friends in Arkansas and would be going to pick her up in a few days. They did not, however, look in the car, and let Cater go on his way. The next day, though, another officer found Ortega's SUV parked at a mall and, according to Calcasieu Parish Sheriff Tony Mancuso, the deputy "took a little more initiative and ended up finding her body in the car". Once confronted by police, Cater admitted having killed Ortega a month before, and that since then he had been driving around with her corpse in the car, using her identity documents to take out several loans. He has been charged with murder, unlawful disposal of human remains and identity theft, while Sheriff Mancuso said: "We have seen some strange cases here in Calcasieu Parish, but this case is definitely an unusual one for us. We have never seen someone drive around with a dead body in the SUV for 30 days." *lawandcrime.com, 23 Aug 2023.*

> *"We have never seen anybody drive around with a dead body in the SUV for 30 days"*

- Sheila Trimble, 65, went into Adena Health in Chillicothe, Ohio, in good health for a routine operation to replace one of her heart valves via catheterisation. However, her family allege, surgeon Dr Jarrod Betz was not certified to carry out the operation and accidentally cut her aorta, a major artery, during the procedure. This caused serious internal bleeding that could not be stopped. Trimble's family were then brought in, shown her looking gravely ill on a ventilator, and urged to approve the hospital turning off her life support as there was nothing more that could be done, which they agreed to. However, medical records obtained by the family record Trimble's death as having occurred two hours before the family saw her, during a second procedure to attempt to stem the bleeding. They claim the hospital had tried to avoid responsibility for Trimble's death by propping her corpse up in bed and covering her face with a ventilator so that she appeared "fake alive". The hospital have firmly denied all allegations. *dailymail.co.uk, 28 Sept 2023.*

- Sabrina Watson from Kentucky contacted police in early 2023 after losing contact with her 96-year-old grandmother, Regina Michalski, who was living in Chicago with Watson's mother, Eva Bratcher, 69. Investigating officers discovered Michalski's body in a garage freezer near their shared apartment and charged Bratcher with hiding her mother's death and having a fake identity card. They were also investigating her for benefit fraud. Authorities believe Michalski died in March 2021, but said they would not be able to confirm this or determine the cause of death until the corpse had thawed. "What could go wrong? Apparently, everything," said Watson.

Also accused of keeping a corpse in a freezer to commit fraud is Damon Johnson, 52, who shared a flat with John Wainwright, 71, in Cleveland Tower, Holywell Head, Birmingham. When Wainwright died in September 2018, Johnson allegedly stashed his corpse in a freezer in the flat, and continued to use his bank card until the body was discovered and he was arrested in August 2020. *irishexaminer.com, 3 Feb; BBC News, 3 May 2023.*

SIDELINES...

DUMMY CRIME

Police in Harlow, Essex, released an alert for a man described as slim, white and in his 20s, with light-brown eyes and yellow teeth, who was believed to be responsible for four incidents in the town between February and August in which he pounced on people with babies and stole their dummies. Police later arrested homeless Josh Guilder, 23, who admitted that he stole the dummies to soothe himself in his tent. *breakingnews.ie, 9+17 Aug 2023.*

GODLY CRIME SPREE

When former youth minister Stephen Luke, 47, appeared in Lismore District Court in Sydney, Australia, accused of setting fire to both a Hillsong Church property and Lismore's St Carthage's Cathedral, as well as a week-long spree stealing money and cars across New South Wales, he explained that "God wanted me to do it". *D.Telegraph (Sydney) 20 Aug 2022.*

ANIMAL POWER

Technicians dealing with a power outage that cut off Sayreville, New Jersey, found the problem was a fish in the transformer. "We're guessing a bird dropped it," local police said, and later posted a tongue-in-cheek message on social media asking readers to remember the fish as "the victim in a senseless death" describing it as "a hard-working family man". Meanwhile, biologists at Boise State University, Idaho, researching bird deaths on power lines, found that rather than having been electrocuted, two-thirds of the birds found dead under the wires had actually been shot. *NY Times International Ed, 12 Aug 2023.*

HANDY EXCUSE

A woman named only as Maxine, a former artificial inseminator, is suing her employers for a work-related wrist injury. Age 21, she worked extracting semen from up to 30 pigs a day and claims the injury "was caused by having to hold the penis still, as the pigs move around a lot," with her lawyer adding, "An injury from repetitive movements and high workload can happen at any age." Now 31, Maxine says the injury limits her ability to do other jobs, including floristry, rubbish removal and demolition, and is seeking compensation for loss of earnings, medical expenses, pain, and suffering. *Queensland (Aus) Courier-Mail, 4 Jul 2023.*

SIDELINES...

PHONE PHANTOM

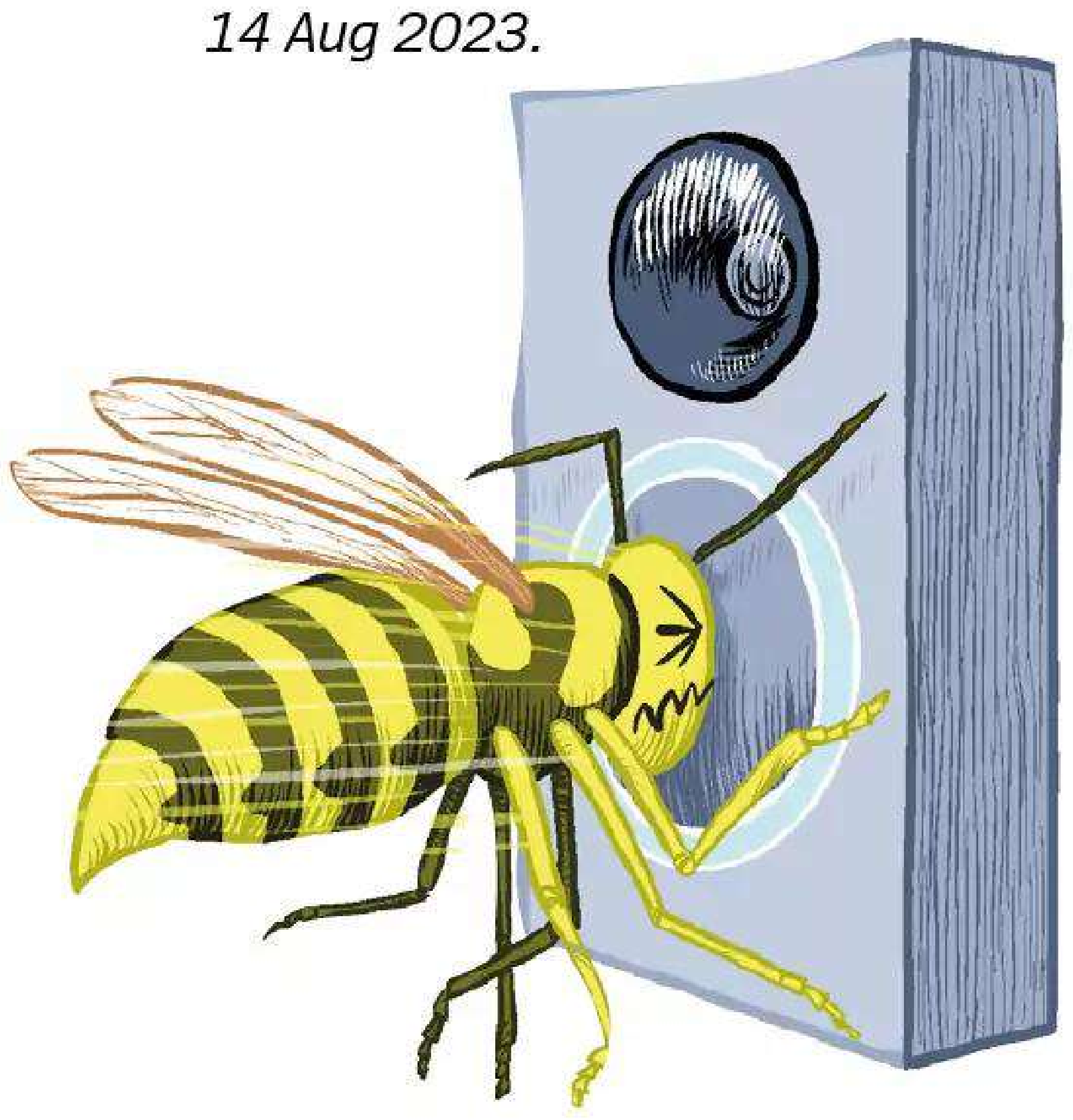
Diane Key, 80, of Horstead, Norfolk, claims she is being tormented by a "haunted" phone. After having to transfer over 300 contacts manually, she found that the torch on her new Motorola G13 phone started to switch itself on at the same time every night. "Then all the texts started coming through, every blooming minute," she says, as thousands of repeated texts arrived each day. "It's like it's haunted. Things like that scare you at my age," she says and has reverted to using an old phone while appealing to Tesco to take the Motorola back and release her from her contract. *D.Star, 29 Aug 2023.*

GOAT INVASIONS

Residents near the Padarn Country Park in Snowdonia, Wales, are being besieged by a herd of more than 50 goats living in the park's ancient woodlands. They eat residents' gardens and damage houses, with one resident coming home to find that a goat had climbed on his roof, fallen through a skylight and then smashed its way out through a window. In Lerags, Scotland, farmer Katherine McKenzie awoke to find that her goats Chas and Dave had broken into her living room, eaten her flowers, chewed a table, knocked over lamps and wrecked a £300 rug, then gone to sleep. "We think they have learned to push down the handle and open the door," she said. *D.Mirror, 10 Aug; pressandjournal.co.uk, 20 Aug 2023.*

BUZZED BY WASP

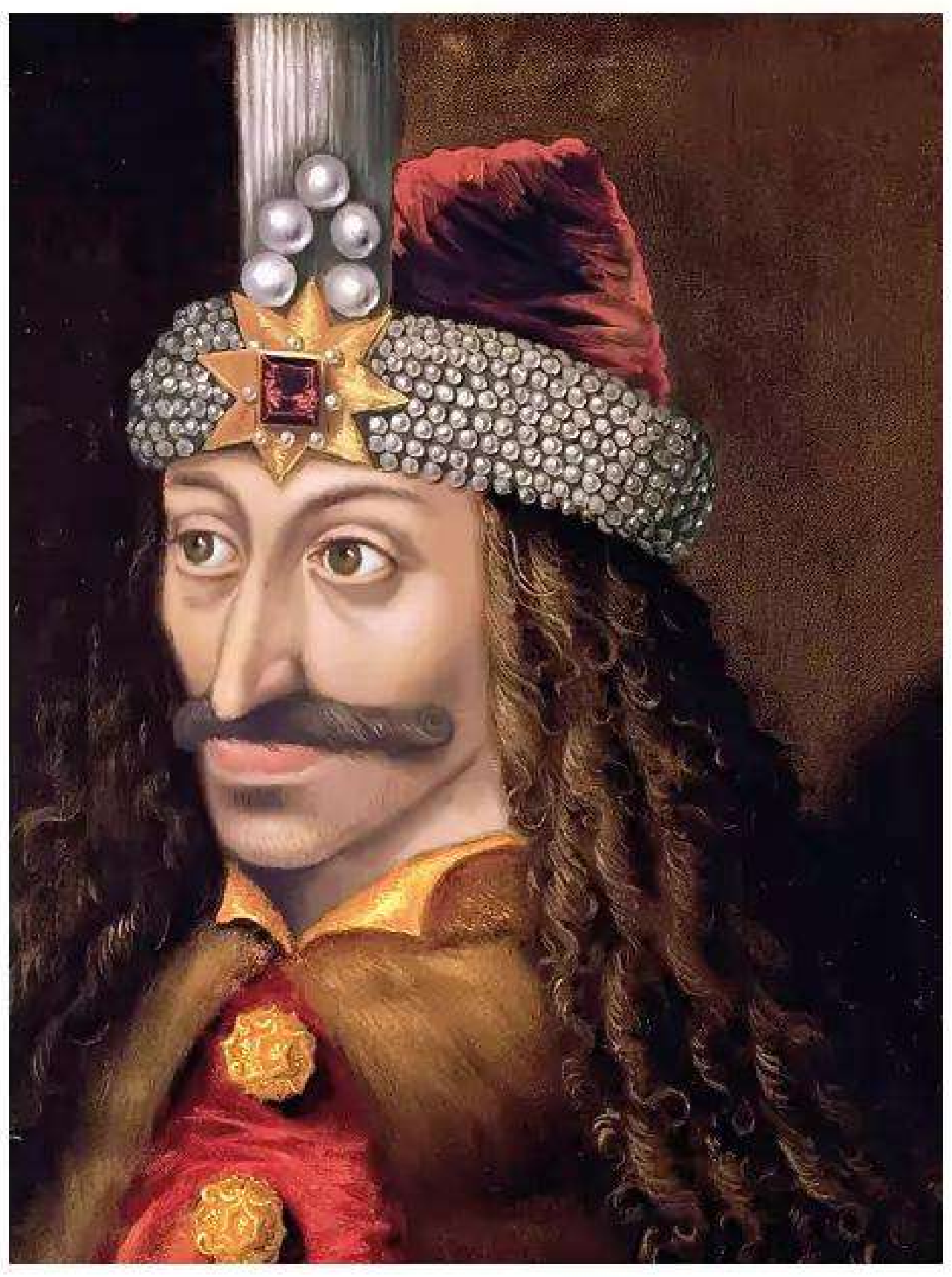
Alex Gomez, 30, from Dallas, Texas, was relaxing at home when his camera doorbell rang. "I opened the app to see who it was and saw a wasp flying away." There were no visitors, and the bell had been triggered by the insect. "No other bugs have done it before," he said. *Sun 14 Aug 2023.*

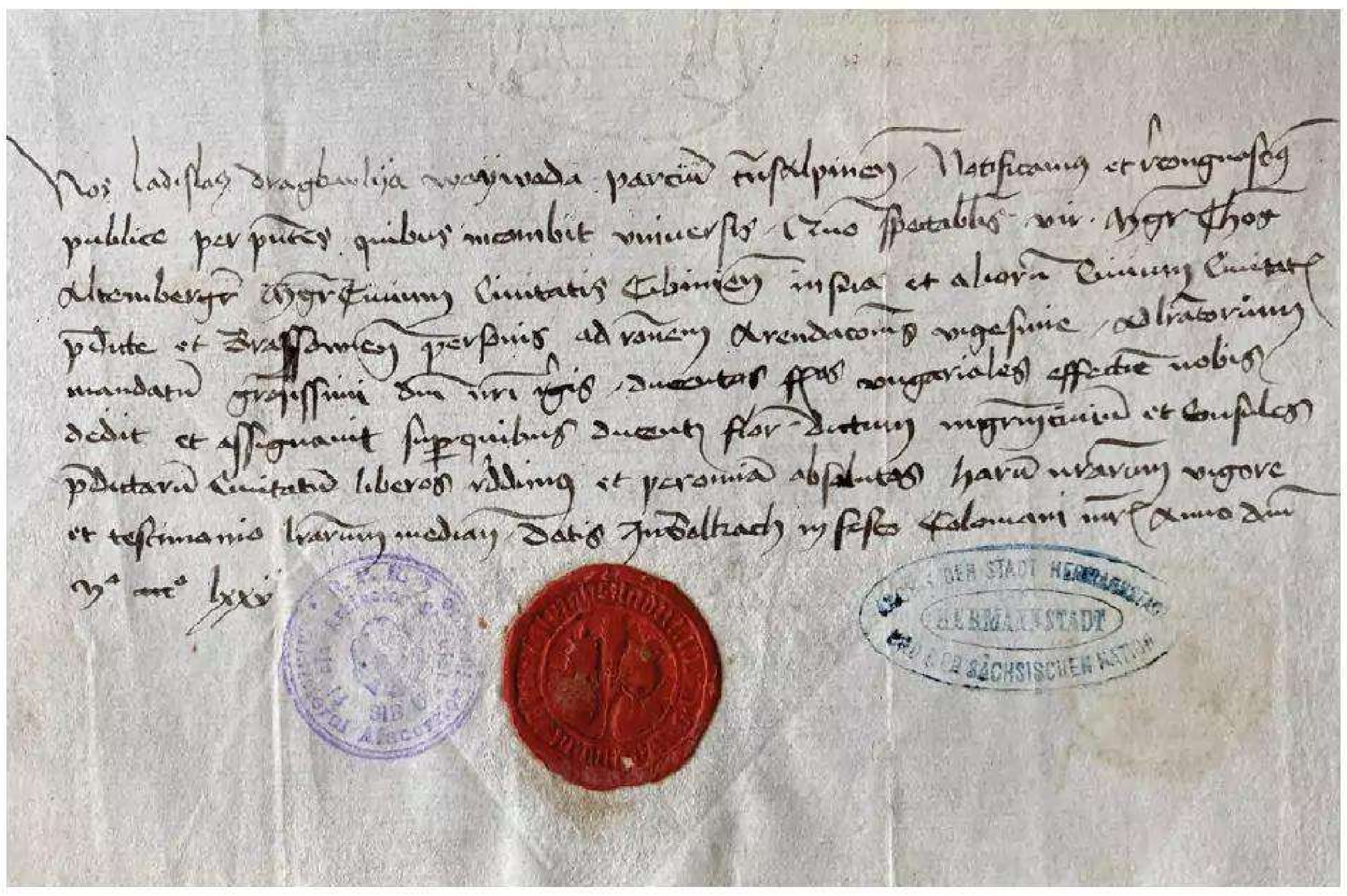


MARTIN ROSS

ALTERNATIVE HISTORY

Dracula cuts out meat, plus time-travelling Nazis

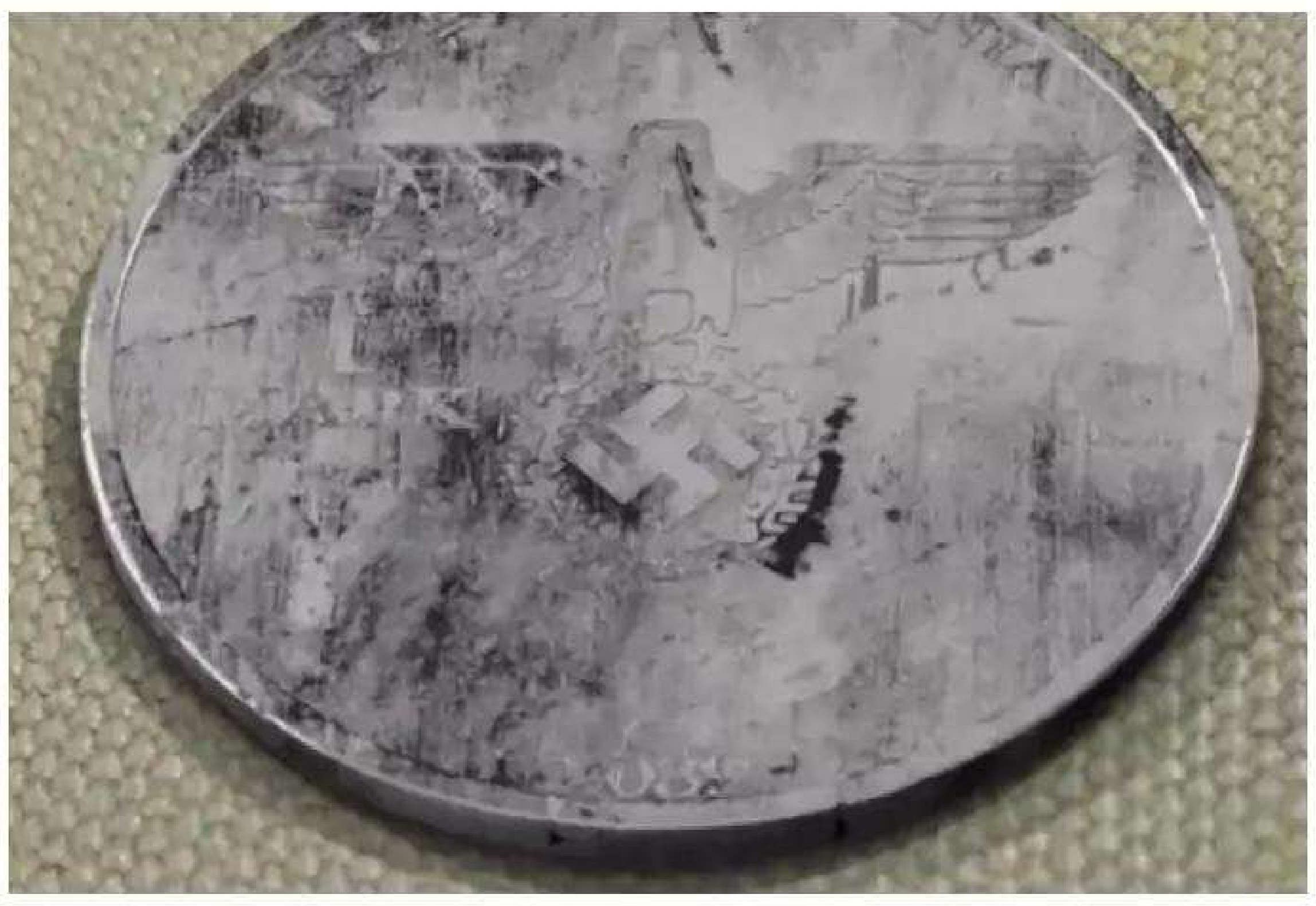




MARIA GAETANA GIOVANNA PITTALÀ ET AL / ANALYTICAL CHEMISTRY

VEGAN VAMPIRE

An international team of chemists has carried out an analysis of the proteins and peptides on three letters written by legendary 15th century Wallachian ruler, Count Vlad Dracula (1431-1476), also known as Vlad the Impaler, to see if they could determine any medical conditions he may have suffered from. When writing a document by hand, fingers and parts of a person's palm rest on the paper and can result in molecules being transferred from their skin. The team applied ethylene-vinyl acetate to the documents to absorb the residues, then removed it and tested it with mass spectrometry. They found more than 500 peptides on the letters, 100 of which were likely to be of human origin. Analysing these, they concluded that the count may have suffered ciliopathy, a genetic disorder that damages cells and organs, as well as inflammatory disease that would have caused problems with the skin and respiratory tract. They also found indications that he might also have suffered from hemolacria, a condition that caused blood to seep into the tear ducts, resulting in blood-tinged tears. However, they found no proteins derived from an animal diet, which suggests that the fearsome warlord – and purported inspiration for Bram Stoker's fictional Count Dracula – may have been a vegan. *phys.org, 10 Aug; independent.co.uk, 10 Sept 2023.*



ABOVE: Vlad the Impaler and one of the letters analysed by a team of chemical scientists and found to contain human peptides. **LEFT**: The mysterious Nazi coin bearing a date of 2039 and found on a building site in Mexico.

NAZI COIN FROM THE FUTURE?

While working on a building site in Mexico in 2018, Diego Aviles claims he discovered a worn but extremely strange silver coin. It appeared to be a Reichsmark from Nazi Germany, but although the date is partly obliterated, it is still just about readable as "2039". This does not appear to be "1939" distorted by wear and damage and the coin is distinctly different from any known to exist from the Nazi era. On one side, along with the swastika and eagle, there is an inscription reading "Nueva Alemania" ("New Germany"), while on the other it reads "Alles in einer Nation" ("All in one nation"), which is not known to have appeared on any genuine German coinage. New Germany does actually exist; it is a small village in Mexico, founded in the 1920s by German immigrants, but has only five residents today and is not known to have ever produced coins.

The coin has been verified as being made of silver and although it is possible to create a counterfeit with apparently genuine wear, it seems unlikely that someone would go to the trouble of counterfeiting a coin that did not resemble any real one. There has been speculation that the coin might have been created as part of the German effort to persuade Mexico to join WWII on their side, only for it to be discarded when they joined the Allies in 1942, but this also seems unlikely.

Some people of a more imaginative bent have suggested the coin's appearance is the result of time travel from a future where a resurgent Nazi Reich has conquered North America, possibly using UFOs, after hiding out for nearly a century in Antarctica (or maybe inside South American volcanoes, or on the dark side of the Moon), or that it has come from a parallel dimension where Germany won the war, as imagined in Philip K Dick's *The Man in the High Castle.* More cynical minds, though, consider it likely to be a stunt to attract views on social media. *archmdmag.com, 24 Sept 2023.*

CLASSICAL CORNER

FORTEANA FROM THE ANCIENT WORLD COMPILED BY BARRY BALDWIN

292: LEXICAL LEVITIES

"I should say that what we call knowledge is ignorance surrounded by laughter" – Fort, *Books*, p19

Humour can turn up in the most unexpected places.

Your Starter For Ten. Which famous treatise on economics dismisses a rival's work as 'Shit' and details an aristocratic lady's skill at fellatio? Answer – Karl Marx's *Das Kapital*, not many people's idea of a beach-book.

In his *Handy-Book of Literary Curiosities* (1892, p236), William Shepard Walsh opined: "A joke might appear to be the last thing one would seek in a dictionary." He made an exception of Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary*, cataloguing some choice examples, albeit dismissing the entire work as "Valueless, except as a literary landmark in English Literature," instancing its "absurd etymology" and "erroneous definitions".

However, Shepard Walsh did excavate one example of humour in an unexpected quarter: Liddell & Scott's *Greek Lexicon*, a tome revised and reprinted many times, still (despite the electronic competition of the *Thesaurus Linguæ Græcæ* based at the University of California, Irvine) the Hellenists' bible.

For the full story of Liddell, Scott, and their Lexicon, see Christopher Stray, editor of *Classical Dictionaries: Past, Present and Future* (2010, pp94-118). In cause is their entry for the word *Sykophantes*, whence our 'Sycophant'. This term comports various nuances. The last one listed derives it from people who informed against persons exporting figs stolen from the sacred trees of Athens. On this, Liddell (father of Lewis Carroll's Alice) & Scott observed: "But this explanation is probably a mere figment."

Shepard Walsh thundered: "Even puns, and very bad puns, have found their way into the most ponderous lexicons. But, to the credit of Liddell & Scott, this ghastly attempt at a joke appeared only in four editions, when, yielding to public opinion, the word 'figment' was changed to 'invention'." In the current 1968 edition, the conclusion reads, "modern explanations are mere guesses." One has to wonder how much actual 'public opinion' was heard on the matter? Greek lexica are not usually the object of mass concern.

The offending paronomasia did not appear in the first edition of 1844. Could it be more than coincidence that the first recorded use of 'figments of the imagination' appears to be in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (vol2, ch10), published in 1847? Or, given his relationships between Alice Liddell and her parents, might we see Lewis Carroll, well known for his love of puns, as a possible inspiration?

As edition succeeded edition, this famous figment excited various individuals to publicise their thoughts on the matter. A flurry of communications (listing each precise reference would engulf my space) appeared in *Notes & Queries* (7th Series, v.7+8, June-July, 1889 – all available online). One contributor, Dr V Paten-Payne, dubs the pun "unintentional", referring to the fifth edition (1864). Alfred Ainger, a specialist in Latin Verse Composition (an exercise ridiculed by Oliver Moody (*Times*, 24 July 2018) as "like building a footbridge out of butterflies") noted that "it undoubtedly occurs" in the fifth edition (1854). Three other correspondents cited its occurrence in editions 4-6. WG Boswell-Stone "vaguely recalls" an obituary of Scott in the *Daily News*, which remarked that there are two jokes in the Lexicon, not specifying the other one, also that the figments were not in the latest edition. This prompted one EAR Ball to ask where the second one was. A second-hand reply was quoted in response from Dr Greenhill, Dean of Christ Church, to the effect that he was unaware of any second one. It is, in fact, very likely to be their definition of *Alochos*: "Bedmate, the *a* being copulative".

Talking of Scott, I here quote from T Selby Henrey's *Good Stories from Oxford and Cambridge: The Saving Grace of Humour* (London, 1919, pp86-7, reproduced on Michael Gilleland's *Laudator Temporis Acti* website (30 April 2013): "Oxford men have been heard to say that, when Liddell and Scott's *Lexicon* was first published, it contained not a few touches of hidden humour, which were deleted in later editions – one explanation of this being that Scott smuggled them in and Liddell was too matter-of-fact to detect them." From which, one might surmise that Liddell never read his daughter's apotheosis, *Alice in Wonderland*. And, if there is a special hell for lexicographers, one hopes the deletion-criminals are burning there.

Liddell died in 1898, 10 years after Scott. His demise prompted no less than Thomas Hardy to knock off a droll poem, 'Liddell and Scott: On the Completion of their Lexicon'. Nowhere in it does he allude to it containing any jokes or puns.

Final remark about dictionary humour. American poet Amy Clampitt (1920-94) reports in one of her letters (*Love Amy: The Selected Letters of Amy Clampitt*, 2005, p226): "Our wonderful Professor Siegel, in telling us about lexicons, mentions the joke about Little Liddell, Middle Liddell, and Great Scott."

Henrey (who cited the figment) adduced other examples of lexical levities. One is from DB Munro's *Homeric Grammar*, wherein the middle voice of *louomai* is elucidated thus: "I wash myself. This is comparatively rare." Hervey glosses, "It is current in Oxford that an undergrad first detected the humorous side of this sentence" – one can well believe it.

Hervey also adduces via Etonian classics beak Hubert Brinton the final Liddell & Scott definition of the word *skindapsos*, a four-stringed musical instrument: 'A What D'Ye Call It'. However, this is a mistake: the Greek word in question was used to describe exactly that degree of vagueness.

Though not a joke, I import a comicality from Lewis & Short's *Latin Dictionary*, contemporary with Liddell & Scott, first published in 1879, long comporting equal authority until modern challenge by the *Oxford Latin Dictionary*. They defined the word *Sellarius*, meaning a male prostitute, as 'One that practises lewdness upon a settle'. How many Latin students nowadays, or even in theirs, would have the faintest idea what a 'settle' is?

Incidentally, this meaning of *Sellarius* has now been disputed in various articles (available online) by Edward Champlin (Princeton) – so we have to say that the word remains unsettled…

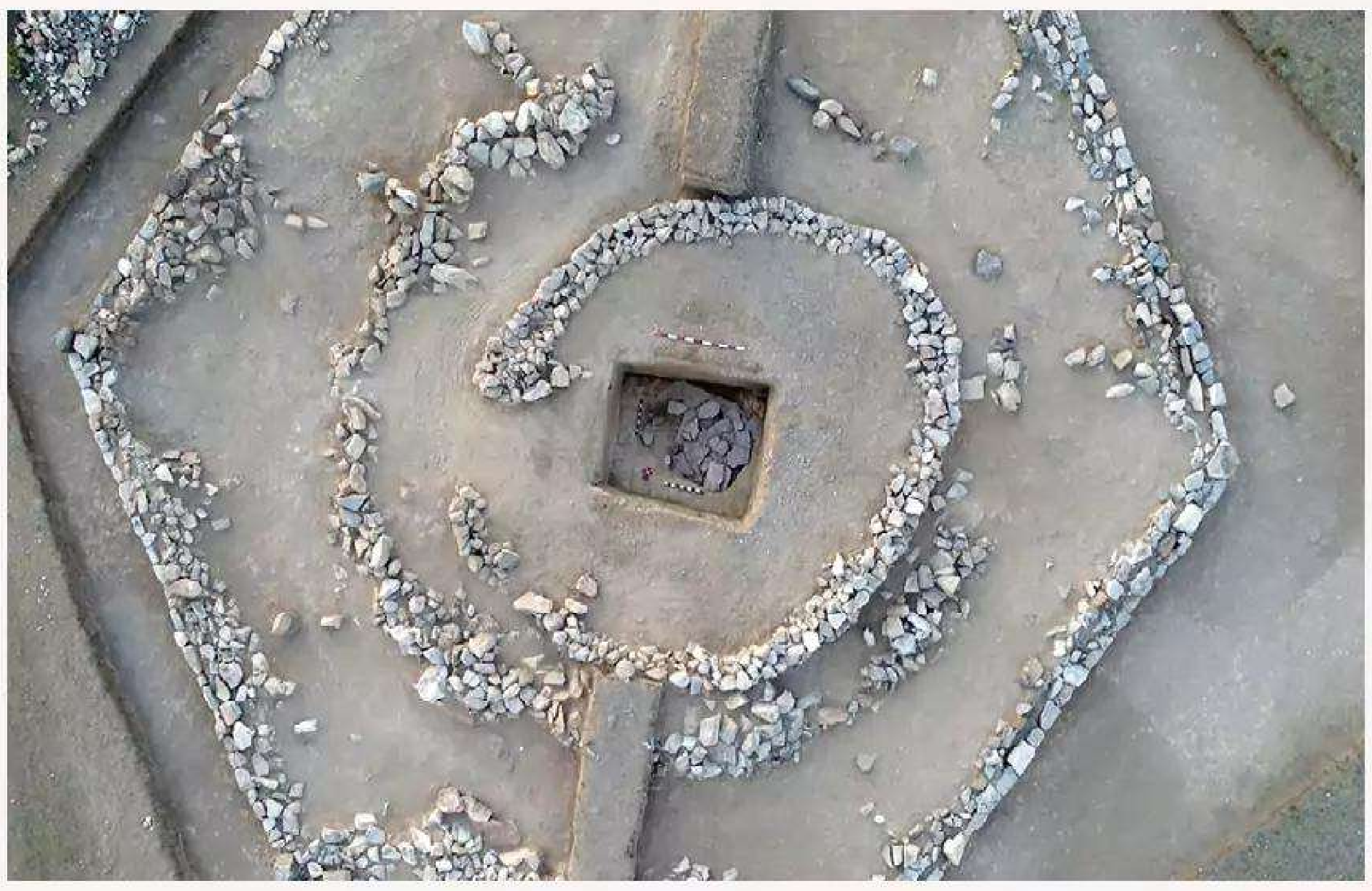
Despite the deleters, it is congenial to conclude by observing how the fig-meant has hung on. In Christine Longford's novel *Making Conversation* (1931), a friend of the heroine Martha, reading Classics at Oxford during The Great War, when told about this, responds: "What a perfect Oxford joke!" Next sentence: "The serious student looked hurt."

If this is all too much for any FT devotee, they can always mutter "I don't give a fig", a phrase going back to Latin slang, where the word for fig is Ficus, itself more Latin slang denoting an hæmorrhoid – just to pile it on, as I did in **FT377:15**…

ARCHÆOLOGY

A MONTHLY EXCAVATION OF ODDITIES AND ANTIQUITIES

PAUL SIEVEKING digs up the latest discoveries, from Mesozoic dino battles to Neolithic viniculture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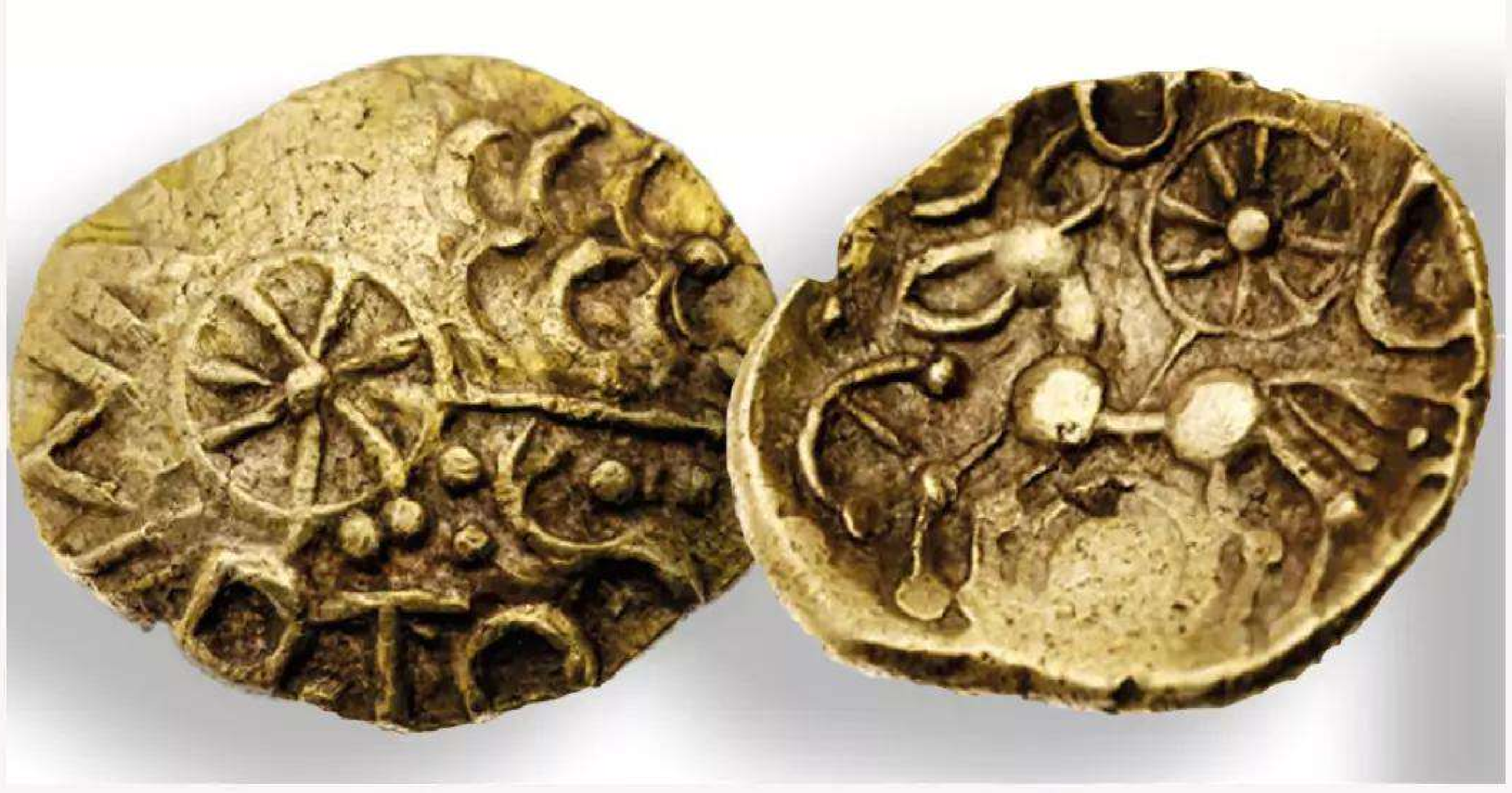

SPINKS

ABOVE LEFT: An aerial view of the hexagonal-shaped pyramid in Kazakhstan. Notice how the inner stone walls form a maze-like path that leads toward the burial site at its centre. **ABOVE RIGHT**: A gold coin bearing letters from the name Esunertos, a hitherto unknown Iron Age ruler. **BELOW**: A Bronze Age sword found in a grave in Bavaria.

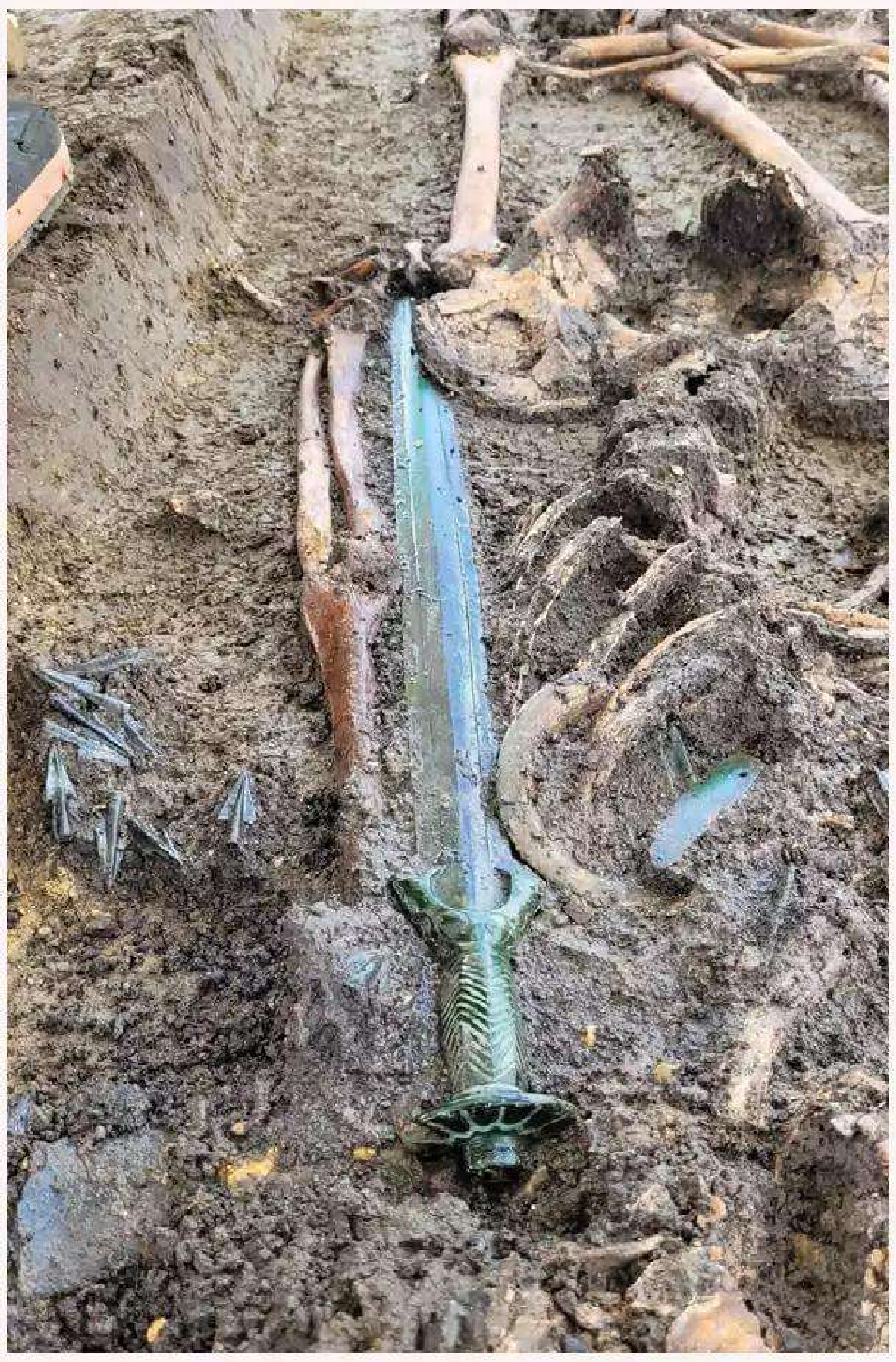
HEXAGONAL 'PYRAMID'

Archæologists in Kazakhstan have discovered a 3,800-year-old hexagon-shaped structure that they describe as a "step pyramid". The maze-like structure currently stands about 10ft (3m) high and probably served as an elite burial site. Megaliths weighing up to one ton are located in each corner. While archæologists use the term "pyramid" or "step pyramid" the Bronze Age monument is unlike the pyramids found in Egypt. Its outer stone walls form a hexagon, and the structure's inner walls look like a maze that leads to a grave at its heart. Parts of it were once covered by an earthen mound. It's not clear if there was ever a roof over part of the structure or whether it was entirely open air.

The people who lived in this region at the time built many graves and stone monuments and engaged in metal working and making jewellery. Their economy may have been partly pastoral – herding large numbers of animals across the Eurasian steppes. The exterior walls of the pyramid are decorated with rock art of various animals, including camels and a multitude of horses. Radiocarbon dating of organic remains indicate that the structure was built during the 19th century BC. The pyramid is located in Kyrykungir, an area that contains a number of ancient graves and monuments. *livescience.com, 22 Sept 2023.*

BRONZE AGE SWORD

A Bronze Age sword with an octagonal hilt has been found in a grave in the town of Nördlingen in Bavaria, and is thought to be from the late 14th century BC. It is in such good condition that it gleams. The grave contains the bones of a man, woman and boy, and other bronze items. The archæologists don't know whether the three were related. Bavaria's State Office for Monument Protection (BLfD) says manufacturing such a sword was complicated, as the hilt was cast on to the blade. Researchers know of two manufacturing areas of octagonal swords in Germany. One region, a local one, was in southern Germany, while the other was in northern Germany and Denmark. *BBC News, 17 June; Services Archaeology and Heritage Association, 16 Sept 2023.*


ARCHÄOLOGIE-BÜRO DR WOIDICH / SERGIU TIFUI

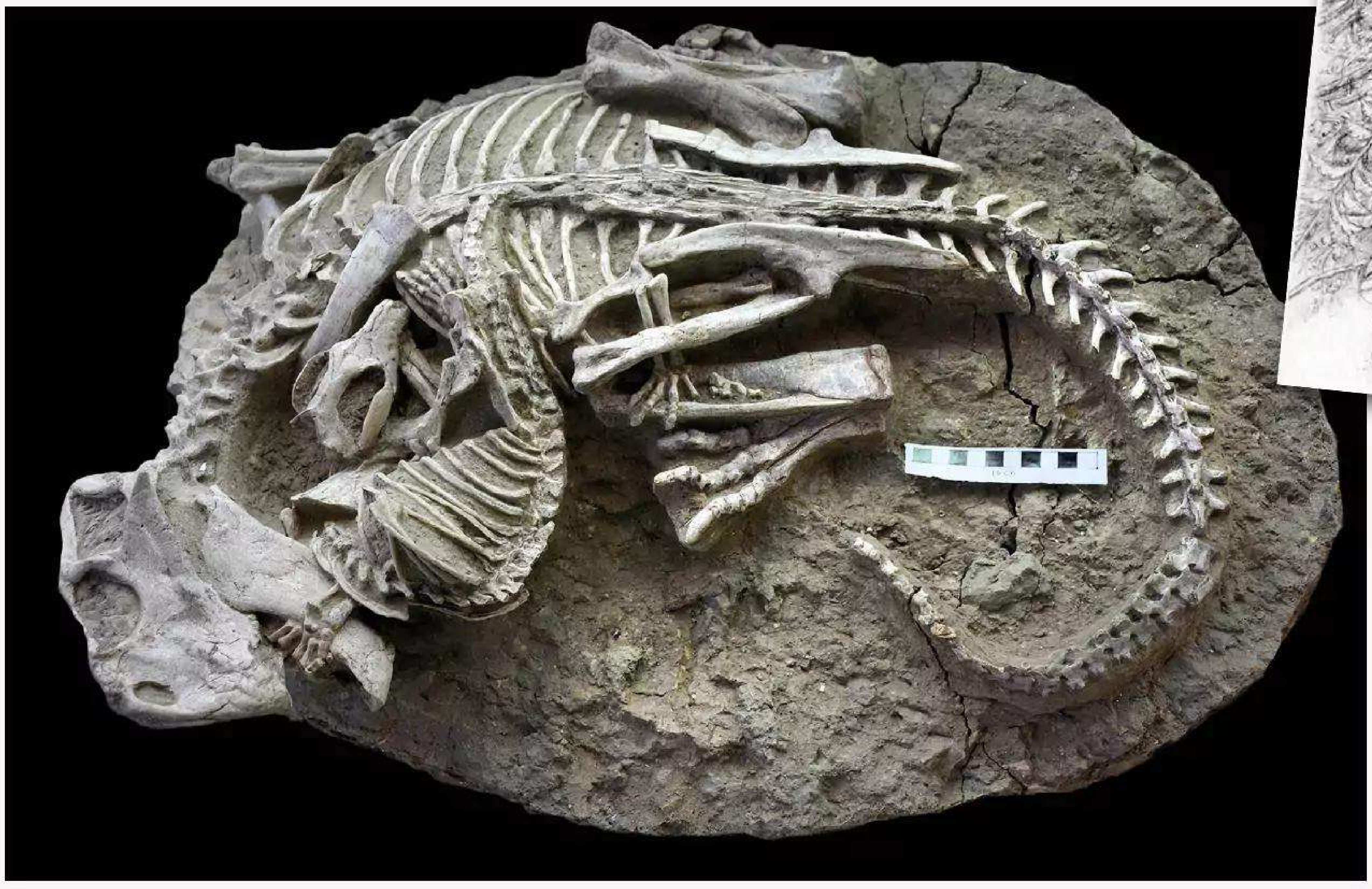
UNKNOWN IRON AGE RULER

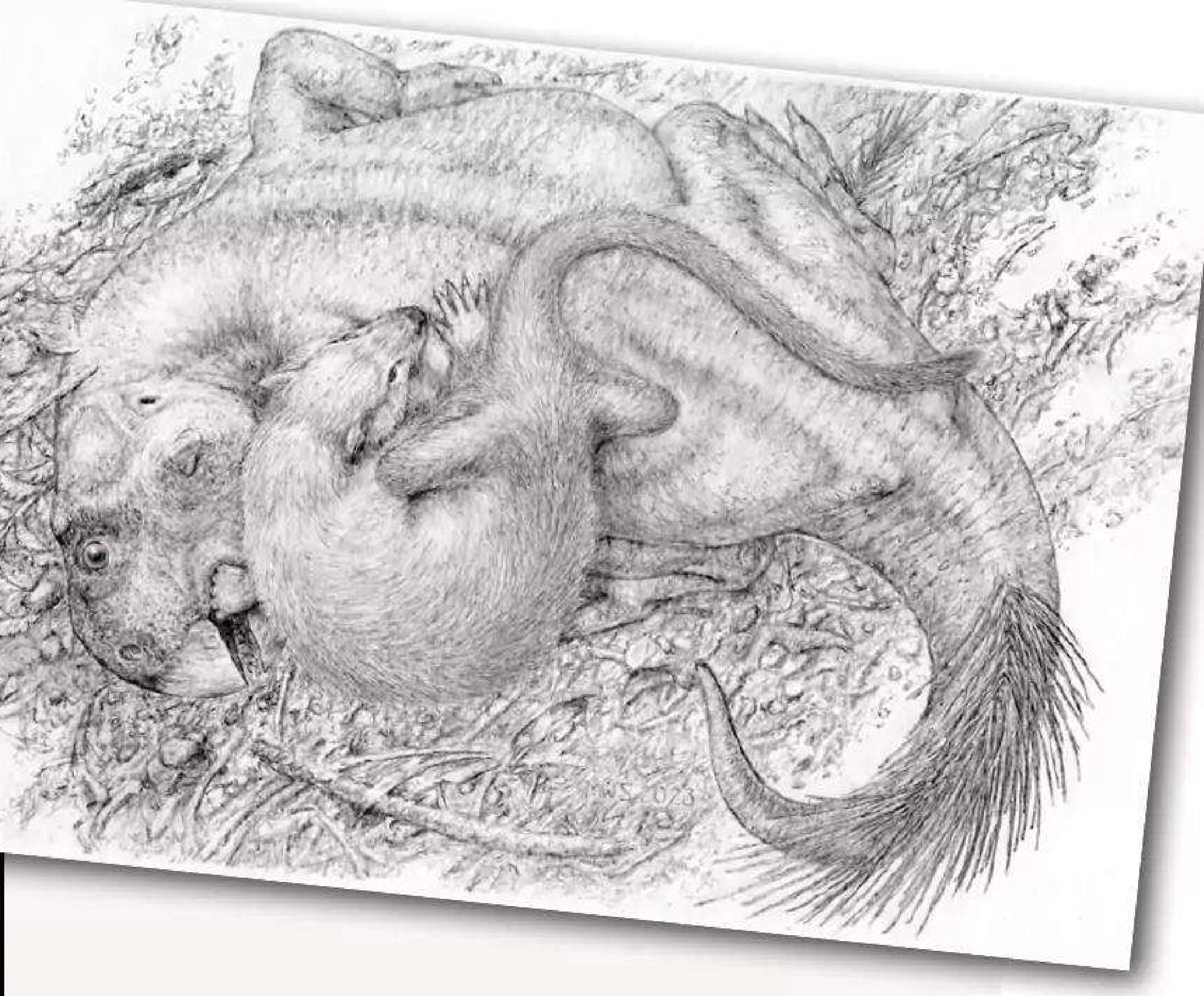
The name of a previously unrecorded Iron Age ruler has been discovered emblazoned on a 2,000-year-old gold quarter-stater coin, dating to around 50-30 BC, uncovered in a field in Hampshire's Test Valley last March (the exact location kept secret) by detectorist Lewis Fudge. The name appears as 'IISVNIRTOS' (Esunertos), which translates as 'Mighty as the God Esos'. One theory is that he possibly ruled as king from nearby Danebury Hill fort. Alongside Commios, his is the earliest attested name on a British-made Iron Age coin. The coin was auctioned by Spinks on 28 September, and fetched £20,400. *Good News Network, 10 Sept; D.Express, 11 Sept; D.Mail, 19 Oct 2023.*

EARLY PLAGUE VICTIMS

Evidence of plague victims in Britain – who died more than 3,000 years before the Black Death swept Europe – have been discovered. Researchers have identified two 4,000-year-old cases of *Yersinia pestis* DNA in human remains found in a mass burial at Charterhouse Warren in Somerset and in a man-made embankment at Levens in Cumbria. The wide geographic spread suggests that this strain of the plague may have been easily transmitted. It had not been found in such ancient remains in Britain before. The bacteria were discovered in dental pulp from two children estimated to be between 10 and 12 and a woman aged 35 to 45. Radiocarbon dating showed the three people lived at roughly the same time.

The earliest known case of *Yersinia pestis* infection was found in 2021 in the remains of a 5,000-year-old hunter-gatherer, a man in his 20s living in what is now Latvia, and denoted only as RV2039. While largely identical to the mediæval plague, a few key genes were missing from the ancient version. One notable absentee, for example, is a gene which allowed the bacteria to infect fleas and be carried by other host animals such as rats. It was this evolution that allowed the bacteria to spread rapidly. As a result, the Latvian





ARTWORK BY MICHAEL SKREPNICK

LEFT: Dinosaur versus mammal: an extraordinary fossil captures the struggle for existence during the Mesozoic. **ABOVE**: Artist's reconstruction showing *Repenomamus robustus* grappling with *Psittacosaurus lujiatunensis*. **BELOW**: An early Neolithic jar, circa 6000-5000 BC, discovered about 50 km (30 miles) south of the modern capital of Tbilisi in the Republic of Georgia. Note the probable grape cluster motives encircling the mouth of the vessel.

version was probably far less infectious than the mutation accrued by the 14th century plague outbreak, which wiped out roughly half the European population. *D.Telegraph, 30 June 2021; D.Express, Sun, 31 May 2023.*

ROMAN TWEEZERS

Archaeologists working in Wroxeter Roman city in Shropshire have discovered a huge collection of over 50 tweezers at the settlement, dating from the 2nd to 4th century AD. They also discovered a skin scraper, perfume bottles, jewellery, and make-up applicators – showing just how important personal hygiene and beauty were to the Romans. It seems that hair removal practices were just as routine for men as they were for women; men who engaged in sports like wrestling would be expected to remove their body hair.

In Roman times the hair-plucking rituals were often performed by slaves. In a letter, the Roman author and politician Seneca complained of the yelps people would let out whilst being plucked, saying "the skinny armpit hair-plucker whose cries are shrill, so as to draw people's attention, and never stop, except when he is doing his job and making someone else shriek for him." *Business Insider, 4 June 2023.*

FOSSIL SHOWS FIGHT TO THE DEATH

A 125-million-year-old fossil shows a fight to the death when a dinosaur was taken on by a mammal a third of its size. They are tangled together, the mammal's teeth sunk into the beaked dinosaur's ribs, its left paw clasping the beast's lower jaw, while its back feet grip its prey's hind leg. "This fossil teaches us that in the Mesozoic 'age of dinosaurs,' dinosaurs were not always king," said Dr Jordan Mallon of the Canadian Museum of Nature. "Even smaller mammals could pose a threat, foreshadowing their rise to dominance 66 million years ago."

The fossilised mammal, discovered in China's Liaoning province in the Lower Cretaceous Yixian formation in May 2012, was identified as *Repenomamus robustus* – a creature about the size of a domestic cat. The victim of its attack was *Psittacosaurus lujiatunensis*, a bipedal, plant-eating beaked dinosaur, about the size of a cocker spaniel. *Psittacosaurus* means 'parrot lizard'. Neither creature was full-grown, and they appeared to have been suddenly entombed by a flow of boiling volcanic mud. Before the battle was interrupted, it seems the mammal was winning. There's a chance that the fossil could be a fake, though the complex and entwined nature of the skeletons make this very unlikely.

It is not the first time mammals have been found turning the tables on dinosaurs. In 2005, researchers discovered a fossil of *Repenomamus robustus* with the remains of a young *Psittacosaurus* in its stomach in the same part of China. The account of the latest find was published in the journal *Scientific Reports*. *Guardian, D.Telegraph, D.Mail, 19 July; Economist, 22 July 2023.*

LOSS OF FACE

Archæologists are scratching their heads over the 1,000-year-old remains of a woman, buried next to her husband, with her face and head hollowed out. The reason for her literal loss of face remains a mystery. The curious couple were unearthed in the former royal palace of Helfta in Eisleben, in the German state of Saxony. The alleged bride, who stood at five feet, was lying next to her slightly bigger husband.

The bones are currently being analysed to try and deduce how the couple died. Experts think the pair were of noble blood due to the "royal accoutrement" in the husband's possession. Among other things, they found a knife, a belt set and the fittings for a so-called official staff, such as those carried by generals, suggesting the couple were extremely wealthy. The woman, meanwhile, was interred sans possessions – a phenomenon deemed quite "unusual" for a noblewoman.

NATIONAL MUSEUM OF GEORGIA

CHEERS!

A 6,000-year-old stone vat in which to press grapes, jars for fermentation and drinking bowls were found in an Armenian cave in 2011 [**FT278:23**]. Then, earthenware jars were found in two Neolithic villages south of Tbilisi in Georgia in 2017 [**FT364:16**]. Some of the jars bore images of grape clusters and a man dancing. Evidence of wine was found in eight jars, the earliest dating from 5,980 BC. "We believe this is the earliest example of the domestication of a wild-growing Eurasian grapevine solely for the production of wine," said the Canadian co-author of the report on the discovery. Previously, the earliest evidence for grape wine-making came from the Zagros Mountains of Iran in 1968, dated to 5,400-5,000 BC. [**FT364:16**].

DNA analysis has now shown that grapevine domestication began much earlier. Varieties for eating and wine-making have been dated to 9,000 BC, about the time humans began farming. The study of 3,000 grapevines identified the point where all samples matched closely and wild gene mutations stopped. Cultivation was started separately in the Fertile Crescent of the Middle East, Armenia and Georgia, known to be the "cradle of wine". The co-author of the DNA report said: "We know grapes in this region are genetically suitable for making great wine. Whether ancient humans had the knowledge to make wine right at the beginning is still debatable." *Sun, 3 Mar 2023.*

The Enfield Poltergeist redux

ALAN MURDIE finds Britain's most famous poltergeist back in the news, as well as on stage and TV

ENFIELDHAUNTINGPLAY.COM

ABOVE: Catherine Tate and David Threlfall star in one of two new stage productions telling the story of the Enfield poltergeist case.

Nearly 50 years on from the original outbreak, the Enfield Poltergeist rocketed back into the news during the autumn of 2023. Sweeping the board in terms of both online coverage and in terms of column inches at Hallowe'en, this iconic case has probably not received so many mentions in the UK and international media at one time since details of the controversial manifestations first were revealed with sensational headlines back in 1977-1980.

Not again, you may say! Just as some notorious crimes echo over decades, so do some ghost stories. Enfield is one of them, with the attention this time round stimulating some notably uncomfortable and perplexed reactions, to put it mildly, from some commentators coming to it for the first time and finding their worldviews challenged.

But having myself known and worked with both the original investigators – Maurice Grosse (1918-2006) and Guy Lyon Playfair (1935-2018) – over 20 years, I have taken a special interest in this fresh wave of coverage, stimulated by two stage dramatisations of the story the ghost-shattered house they spent many hours in and the release of a four-part TV docu-drama series on Apple TV+. I must also say they would have found the latest reactions rather predictable.

> "It's a working class family. They've got all kinds of pressures on them, and some of those pressures become poltergeists"

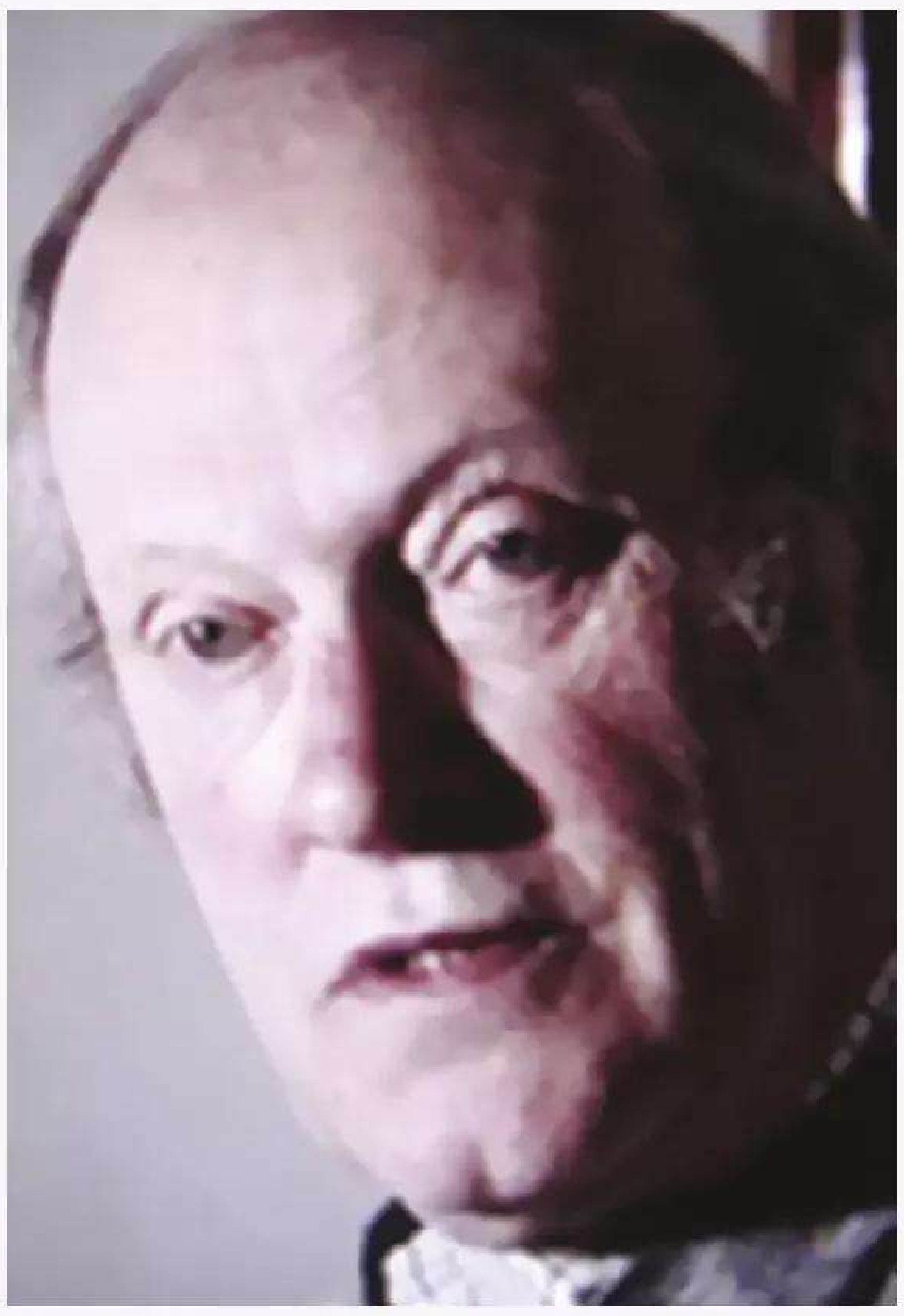
Of the two theatrical offerings, *The Enfield Haunting* by Paul Unwin and starring Catherine Tate and David Threlfall bills itself as depicting "what happened when a dedicated single mother tries to protect her three children from something that is incomprehensible, deeply disturbing". Opening at the Ambassador Theatre in London's West End, it coincided with the emergence from fringe theatre of a wholly separate show – *The Enfield Poltergeist* by Paul Voodini and Kiera Rhodes.

The playwrights of each came to the Enfield case quite independently of each other. Unwin was originally inspired by meeting Guy Playfair. "I had this extraordinary afternoon with him," he recalled, which they spent listening to a selection of the original Enfield tapes (now archived by the Society for Psychical Research at Cambridge University Library). Finding his scepticism dissolving, Unwin was inspired to write the play.

In contrast, Paul Voodini, an accomplished stage entertainer, psychic and mentalist, remembers the furore over the poltergeist in the 1970s and explains being gripped by it happening to "real people" and occurring in a council house and not in "a posh haunted castle".

Together, the playwrights help identify just why the haunting has embedded itself in the collective psyche and refuses to be laid. ('Seeing double: two visions of the Enfield Poltergeist visit English theatres', *Guardian*, 13 Sept 2023)

For Voodini, it is the human dimension: "It's a working-class family. They've got all kinds of pressures on them, and some of



LEFT: Enfield investigator Guy Lyon Playfair and (below) his classic book on the case.

those pressures become poltergeists".

For Unwin, it is the wealth of data gathered by Grosse and Playfair. The investigation proved something of a breakthrough, if only for the mountain of evidence accumulated over a period of 18 months. It was derived from over 1,000 hours of observations undertaken on approximately 180 visits to the house between 5 September 1977 and June 1978, including 25 all-night vigils. Photographs and many hours of tape recordings were obtained, with transcripts of events and conversations from the first phase running to over 500 pages.

These were mined by Apple TV+ for its series *The Enfield Poltergeist*, a meticulous recreation with unfaultable lip-synching by the actors who bring the original eerie audio recordings to life within an uncanny studio re-construction of the house. These are interspersed with witnesses' memories from a pool of 30 people recorded at the time.

Phenomena included knocking sounds and raps, the appearance of poltergeist 'voices' from the throat of 11-year-old Janet Hodgson, the dominant one claiming to be former tenant Bill Wilkins, who had died in the house in 1961, speaking in rasping and guttural tones. Also reported were numerous object movements, stone-throwing and stranger happenings like apparitions, telepathic communications, shared dreams, numerous "coincidences", physiological symptoms, headaches that came and went with the phenomena, the appearance of fire and water, trances or altered states of consciousness, interference with electrical and mechanical equipment, EVP effects and doppelgänger materialisations.

Grosse and Playfair regularly got signed statements from witnesses or kept audio recordings, as well as collecting physical evidence in the form of damaged and burnt objects and fittings.

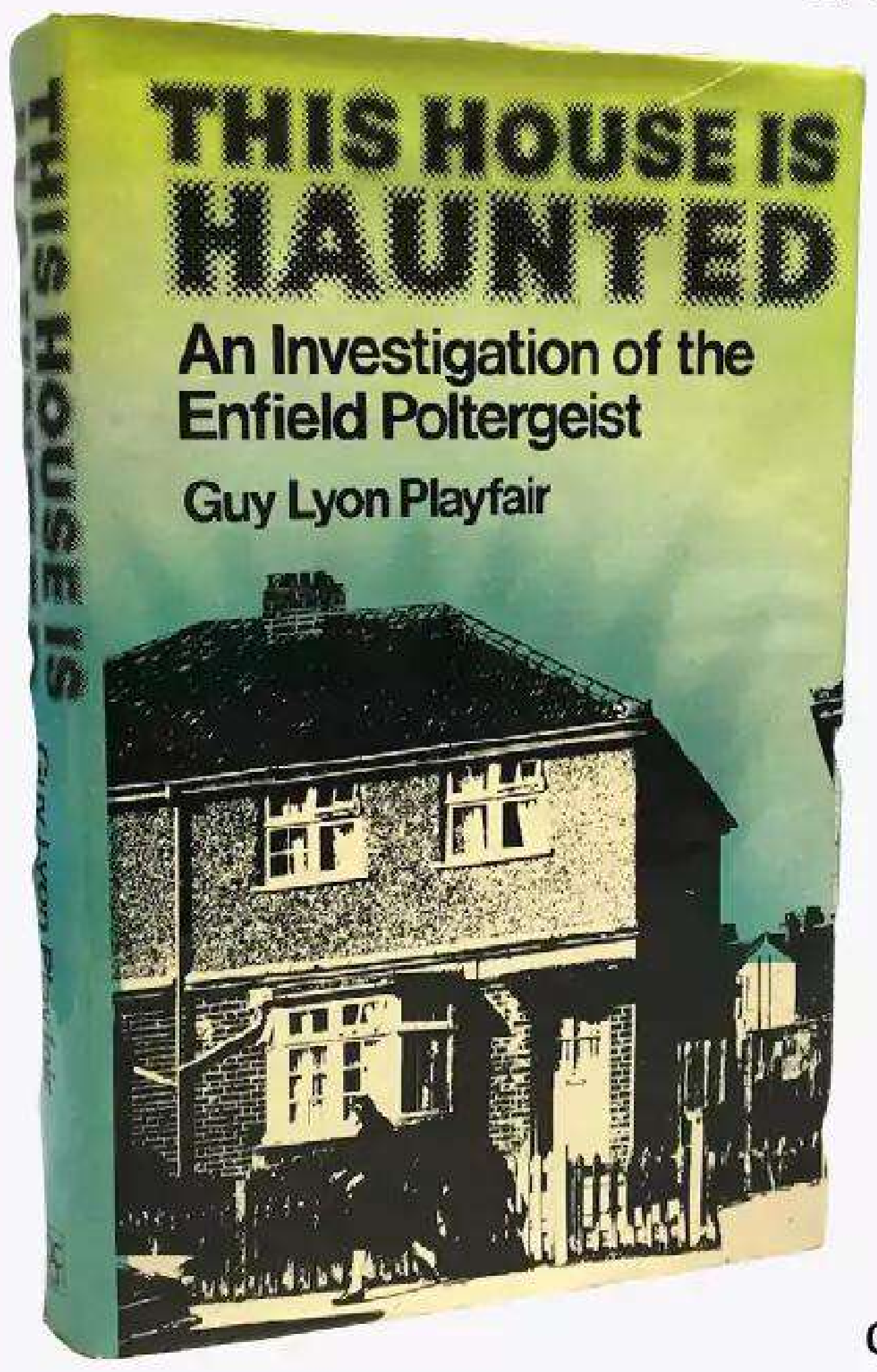
Drawing on all this material, the series has stimulated prominent coverage across the international media, generating mentions of the Enfield Poltergeist in over 400 newspapers and mainstream news sources between 13 Sept and 17 Nov 2023. Coverage stretched from North America and Mexico, to Germany, the Far East and China. As well as bringing a new global audience to the story, the series has partially mitigated the false impressions left by the thundering codswallop in the film *The Conjuring 2*, which peddled a wholly fictional version featuring self-styled demon-fighters Ed and Lorraine Warren. On this, the *Indian Express* (27 Oct 2023) complimented the *The Enfield Poltergeist* for "wisely ignoring Ed and Lorraine Warren's contributions", showing not everyone gets taken in by Hollywood hokum.

Amid this, two surviving witnesses from 1977 went to the British media to confirm their experiences again. Photographer Graham Morris, who visited the house regularly for the *Daily Mirror* between 1977 and 1979, vividly recollected strange events: "Things started flying all over the place… It was just the weirdest thing that has ever happened to me." (*Independent* and *Mail* online, 23 Oct 2023)

He recalled: "I'm in the corner looking through my lens. I can see everything. No one is throwing this stuff. No one is doing anything. They're not trying to do anything for fun or for laughs or whatever. They were all, particularly the kids, absolutely horrified." Morris is disinclined to believe in ghosts, preferring to explain what he witnessed in terms of embodied psychic powers. "I think this girl has some sort of force," he said bluntly.

His impressions were echoed by Paul Burcombe, a cousin of the girls, on *This Morning* (ITV, 27 Oct 2023). Speaking to programme presenters Alison Hammond and Dermot O'Leary about witnessing events as a 13-year-old, his recollections included furniture flipping over and Janet seemingly dragged across the room by an unseen force.

It is the accumulation of evidence at Enfield, not its absence, which poses the explanatory challenge, particularly to all who assert such things cannot take place. The problem is not lack of evidence but a surfeit.



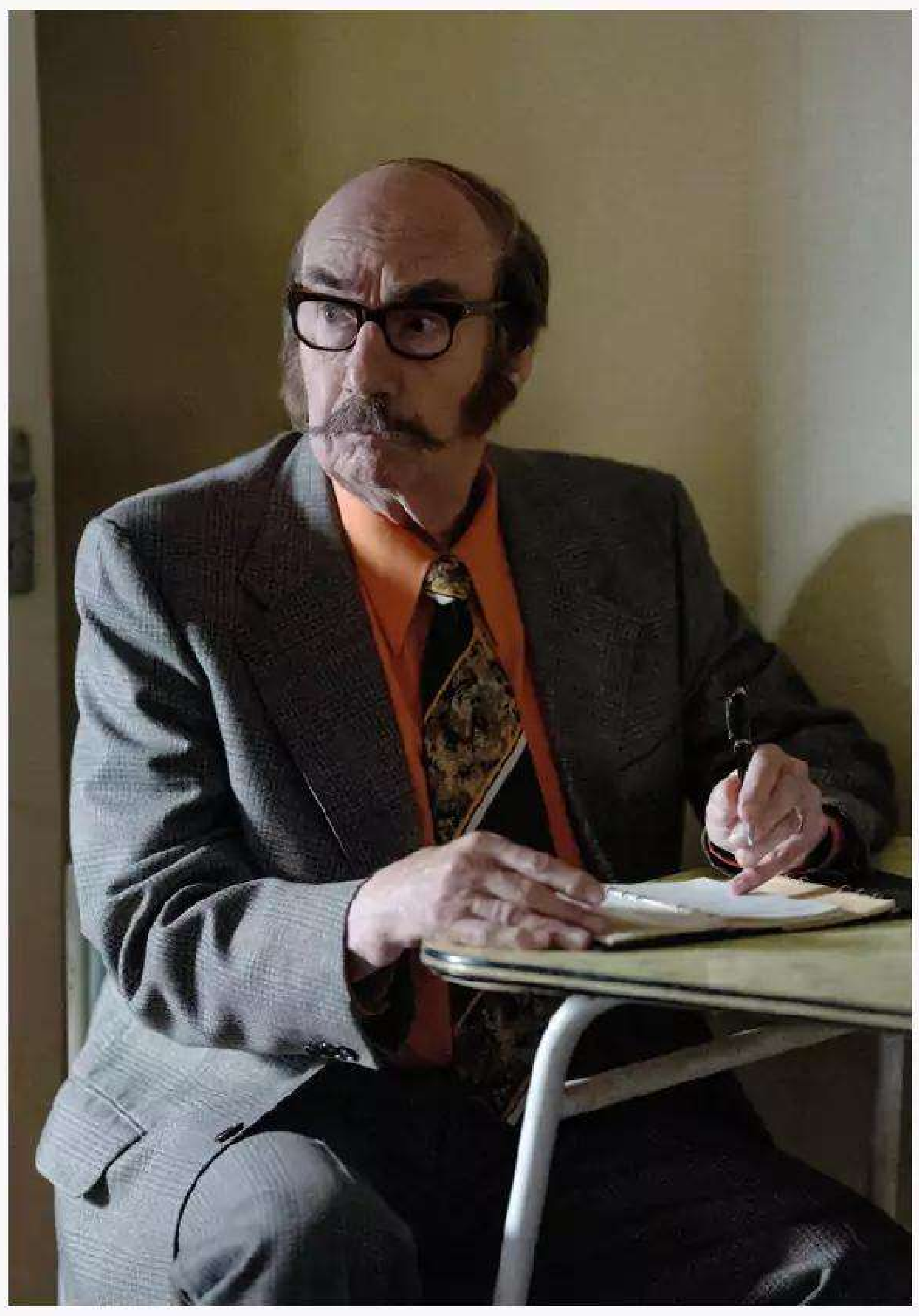
There is also an accompanying problem. The existence of material evidence has the capability of disturbing and unsettling many people on a deeper level. The physicality of many of the phenomena at Enfield can trigger an uncomfortable reaction or what amounts to cognitive dissonance on the part of otherwise intelligent but sceptical people, even if only exposed to second-hand accounts and summaries of it.

Initially, after the phenomena seemingly ceased and the researchers departed, in 1979 many thought Enfield was all over with the publication of the best-selling *This House Is Haunted* (1980) by Guy Playfair. Public interest dipped, awaiting the next exciting thing in ghosts.

In fact, the material gathered at Enfield had left sections of the Society for Psychical Research in turmoil, with members deeply divided over the reality of the manifestations. Unlike the Borley story, there has never been any allegation of deliberate fraud against Grosse and Playfair, who were always willing to put their findings at the disposal of their peers. Yet both initially found themselves confronted by a widespread scepticism and even hostility when they did.

I saw such reactions a number of times with diverse audiences at lectures both gave over the years. Typically, Guy Playfair would simply begin by playing 10-12 minutes of original audio tapes of the voices of the terrified family and reactions of the researchers as manifestations erupted. Within a couple of minutes any sneering ceased. Members of audiences exposed to the original recordings variously proved bemused, aghast, fascinated or disturbed to the point of walking out, depending on their individual dispositions.

When Grosse and Playfair raised these reactions, the SPR agreed to the formation of the Enfield Poltergeist Investigation Committee (EPIC) which re-investigated the whole case over 1981-82 and re-interviewed local witnesses.



SKY LIVINGTV

ABOVE LEFT: Christopher Ettridge as Maurice Grosse in the 2023 Apple TV+ series *The Enfield Poltergeist*. **ABOVE RIGHT**: Juliet Stevenson as Betty Grosse, Timothy Spall as Maurice Grosse and Matthew Macfadyen as Guy Lyon Playfair in The 2015 Sky TV series *The Enfield Haunting*.

At the end of its 190-page report EPIC's verdict was that genuine psychokinetic incidents occurred. (*The Enfield Poltergeist Investigation Committee Report* edited by Hallson, Peter, Barrington, Mary Rose et al (SPR, 1982).

Following the report, overt criticism mostly fell away among parapsychologists. But even though the Enfield Poltergeist came to be reluctantly accepted as real, there was no resultant pressure or drive to study the data further or stretch the intellectual frontiers of science and scholarly enquiry.

Maurice Grosse wrote relatively little about Enfield, instead inviting people to come and examine the material to reach their own conclusions. Almost no one did in nearly 30 years. Guy Playfair encountered similar intellectual inertia.

Sceptics stepped into the vacuum in debunking efforts, alleging a collection of fakery and malobservation and reflexive assertions that the entire case was explicable by girls playing tricks.

Once again Grosse and Playfair refuted these allegations by reference to the actual evidential material gathered, stating that no more than 2% of what was witnessed and observed was attributable to pranks played by the girls in the house or copying what they saw, and that still left 98% unaccounted for. Critics were invited to come and peruse the data or, alternatively, supply the proof for their accusations. None did. Singularly failing to produce any credible countervailing evidence or sustainable narrative, sceptics (or skeptics as they like to spell it) adopted a default strategy of a tactical avoidance akin to Pontius Pilate asking, "What is truth?" and not staying for an answer. For instance, Benjamin Radford in his book *Investigating Ghosts: The Scientific Search for Spirits* (2017) side-steps the case, saying it was all "too complex to go into here".

> "You could imagine it being in your home, which is the frightening thing"

Over the years, following the debate over Enfield, I have been puzzled – stunned at times would not be too strong a word – by such avoidance. After all, if merit exists in 'group hysteria', 'folie a deux' 'adolescent sexuality', childish chicanery or plain human stupidity, then the Enfield material should provide data galore to test and prove such hypotheses valid. Yet no one has attempted to apply their novel solutions to the original material.

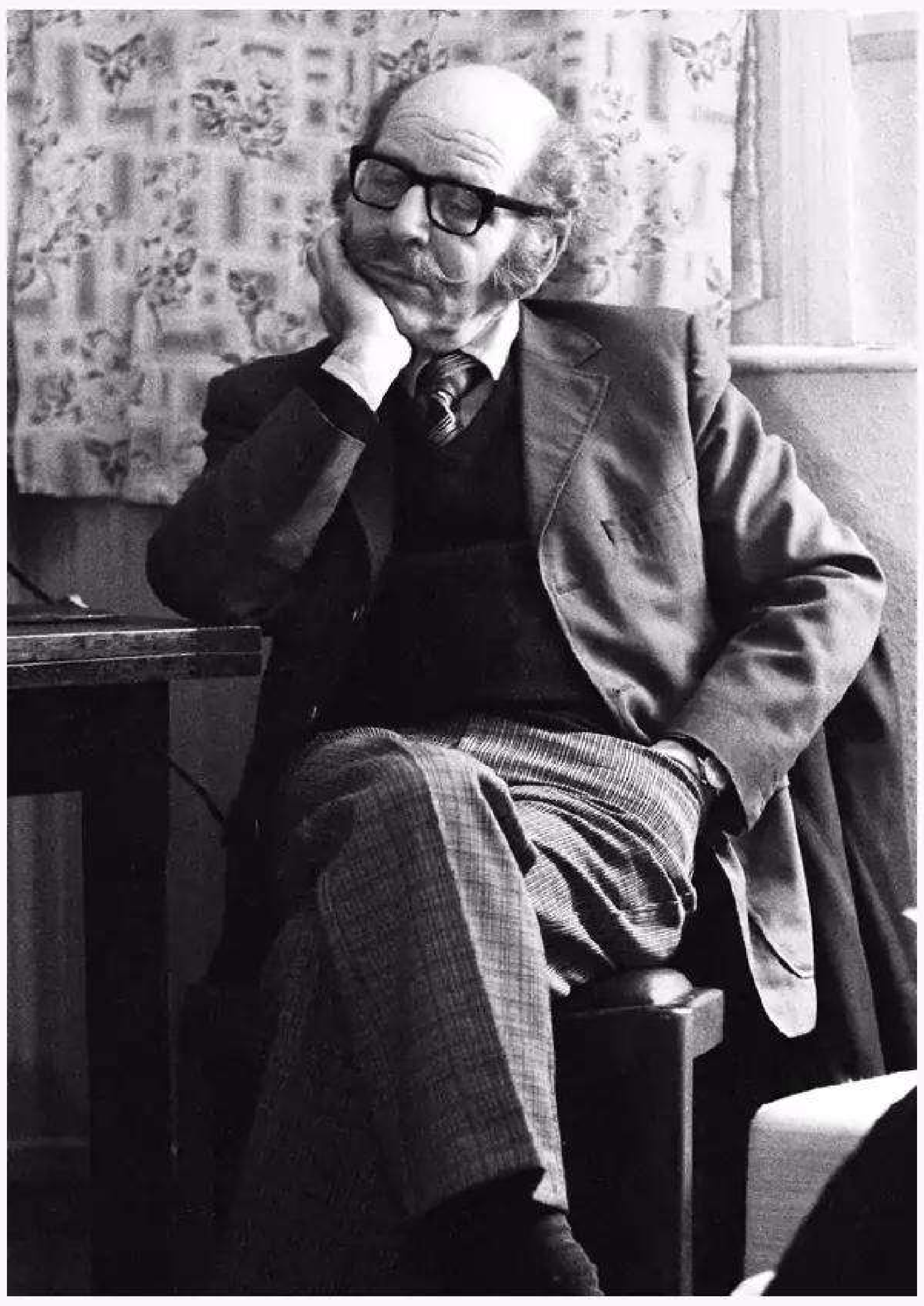
Accordingly, storytellers, filmmakers and playwrights have stepped into the scientific and philosophical void with artistic treatments and imaginative interpretations. Over a generation these have collectively stimulated and fed public interest. The first was the grand guignol *Ghostwatch* (1992) followed by various documentaries including the 2015 Sky TV mini-series *The Enfield Haunting* starring Timothy Spall and Matthew Macfadyen (see **FT329:51**), and *The Conjuring 2* in 2016.

While *Ghostwatch* spooked the popular viewing audience, it is TV critics and journalists who now find themselves alarmed or confused by the material involving Enfield. Many highbrow critics appear unhappy with the idea of an unsolved mystery pointing to paranormal forces really operating in the world and being served up as entertainment for the masses. This was aptly demonstrated in some of the reviewer comments on the Apple TV+ series.

Benji Wilson in the *Telegraph* (22 Oct 2023) criticised the series for revealing too much evidence, of being too entrenched in its source material and diligent presentation of the original recordings saying, "It's not until the real-life Janet Hodgson, the teenage girl who was tormented back in the 1970s, appears on camera for her testimony that the story finds its purpose… I'd venture that all but the most devoted ghostbusters will have given up."

On the other hand, in the *Guardian* (27 Oct 2023) Leila Latif was perhaps shutting her eyes, for she attacked the series as "flimsy" and guilty of "a lack of interest in what lay beneath the surface", breezily asserting "that what appears to be supernatural could be an all-too-natural manifestation of the emotional turmoil that was… happening in that house." Well if it can, what precisely was that natural explanation and how did it achieve the effects observed?

TRINITY MIRROR / MIRRORPIX / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO



TRINITY MIRROR / MIRRORPIX / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE LEFT: The Hodgson children's bedroom at 284 Green Street, Enfield, photographed on 12 September 1977. **ABOVE RIGHT**: The real Maurice Grosse enjoying a relatively quiet moment during his investigations at the Green Street house on 17 February 1978.

After viewing it all in Germany, Wieland Freund, for the newspaper *Die Welt am Sonntag*, was asking, "What is a poltergeist, anyway?" Given the word is German in origin (see 'Ghosts, Apparitions and poltergeist incidents in Germany between 1700 and 1900' by Annekatrin Puhle (1999), *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research,* vol 63 no 857, pp.292-205) and he had just sat through the whole series, one might think he ought to possess a modicum of understanding. Declaring "Poltergeists don't exist, but poltergeist cases do", he then admitted that Janet Hodgson "doesn't seem like a fraud at all, but rather like a tortured human being." (28 Oct 2023).

Most distressed of all appeared to be Eva Wiseman writing for the *Observer*, who stated *The Enfield Poltergeist* series "felt uncomfortably real". For her, the "crackling voices of children" prompted the equivalent of a Sunday sermon in a stream of consciousness encompassing class, repressed adolescent sexuality, collective hysteria, Jimmy Savile, "how men are still murdering women every week" and even climate change. Clearly unnerved by the material, she denounces credulous Britons who believe in poltergeists today as suffering "from a dark kind of magical thinking... fuelled by pundits who create ghosts in the form of immigrants and minorities to distract us from the everyday crimes of politicians and billionaires," finally announcing "everyone knows our daily choices are contributing to the climate emergency, and most still continue to drive, and fly, and eat meat and have babies".

Given Wiseman's piece appeared on 5 November I was mildly surprised that this outpouring omitted to point the finger at fireworks and bonfire night as well; what I fail to see is how these particular contemporary concerns provide any explanation, for instance, for a chair flying by itself across the Hodgsons' living room 47 years ago. Reading her article and similar pieces, I am reminded of the line of the witty Marquise du Deffand (1696-1780): "I don't believe in ghosts, but I'm afraid of them!" Or perhaps Paul Voodini is spot on in saying, "You could imagine it being in your home, which is the frightening thing."

Maurice Grosse and Guy Playfair would have anticipated such opinions. Ten years after their iconic investigation they reviewed the reactions they encountered, observing: "There are those, we have found, who are prepared to believe in psi phenomena provided they happened a long time ago and preferably in another country. The suggestion that they happened yesterday evening right here is less welcome." (Guy Playfair Guy and Maurice Grosse (1988) "Enfield Revisited: The Evaporation of Positive Evidence" *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*, vol 55 no 813, pp.208-219).

The one glaringly obvious point that emerges from the data is that there is proof of unexplained physical forces at work in the Hodgson house, not purely mental or subjective ones. Again, Grosse and Playfair found "... there are those who will reject any evidence of this kind if it conflicts with their beliefs, conscious or unconscious, concerning ways that physical systems should behave."

Yet virtually no one seems to be interested in trying to make sense of events from the starting point of conventional physical models, save for a few honourable exceptions such as Dr Barrie Colvin, who analysed the sound signatures of anomalous raps in 2008-2010, finding them seemingly consistent with a vibration arising within material objects rather than being caused by a manual, percussive rap achieved by striking the surface of an object.

For his part, Maurice Grosse ultimately eschewed theories, rather emphasising that the primary task was collecting evidence and viewing pre-conceived notions as a handicap to any assessment. He commented in 2003: "In the past we have had underground streams, ley lines, absorbent building materials, planetary influences, faulty observation, delusions, over-active imaginations, alien visitors, low and high frequency sound, earth tremors, temperature changes, to name but a few of the reasons to account for PK, haunting and all the other phenomena associated with our subject. I look forward to the next popular and fashionable revelation." (Maurice Grosse, Correspondence in SPR *Journal*, vol 67 63- 64, 2003)

In philosophy, it seems Maurice Grosse was something of a fortean.

For more on the Enfield case, see **FT32:47-48, 33:4-5, 166:39, 288:18, 299:14-15, 329:51, 438:31**.

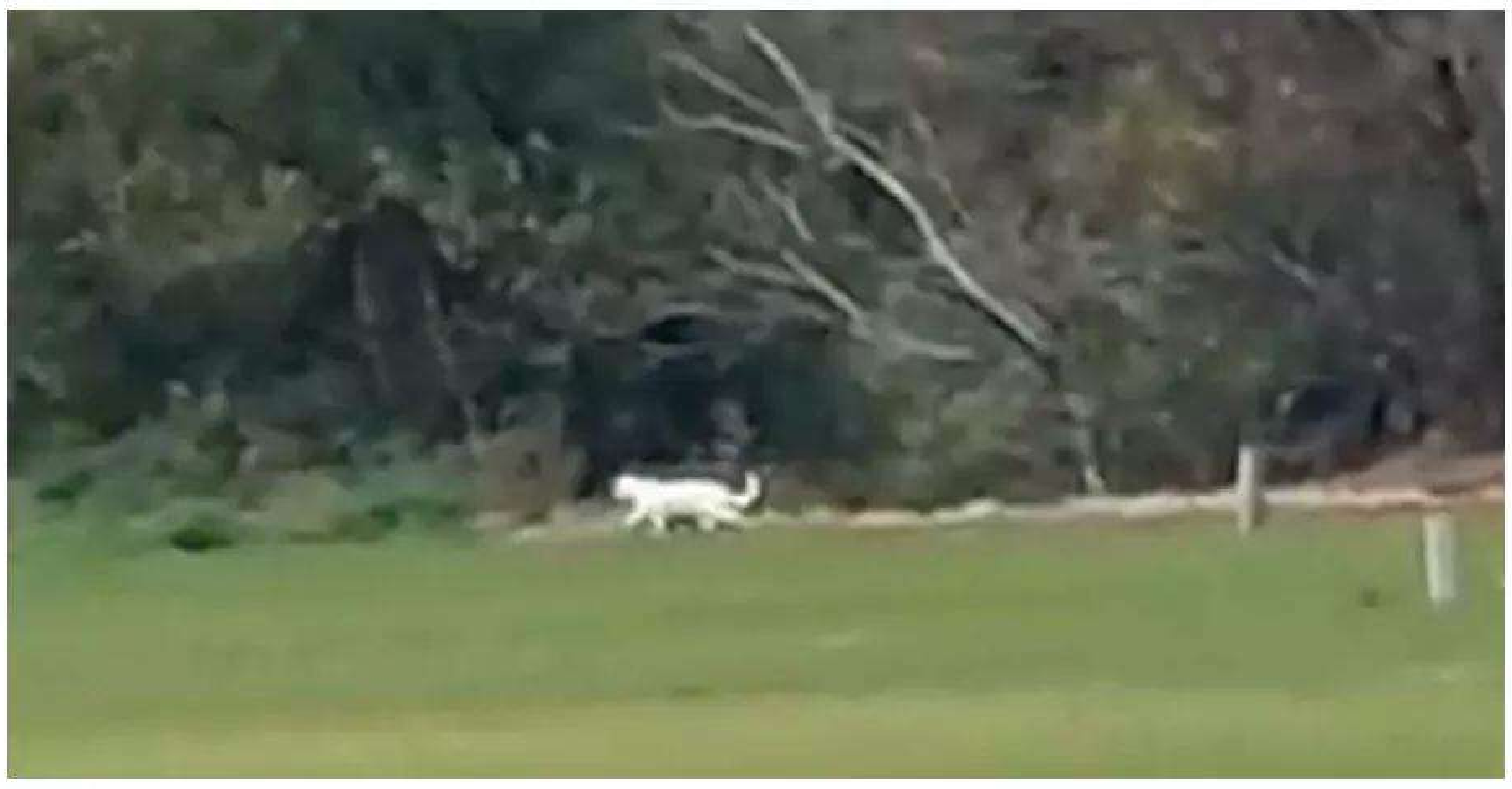
STRANGE CONTINENT

ULRICH MAGIN reports on recent Euro-weirdness, from mystery crocs to meteorites and miracles

A WHITE ABC

A rare example (are there even any others?) of a large, snowy white, alien big cat was reported early this year in the vicinity of Los Barrios, Cádiz, Spain. A resident was near the Finca Los Peces at Benharás when he saw and filmed a pure white cat "of large dimensions". The mayor of Los Barrios, Miguel Alcochel, informed the press that "the video that has gone viral, and in which you see a species of white feline, is not a hoax, it is real. These images have been taken at Los Barrios and the neighbour who witnessed the animal has already reported it to the Guardia Civil." The Guardia Civil started a search for the animal, which the mayor suggested was an exotic escapee. "We are waiting to confirm what type of feline it is, yet its presence is not so far-fetched since, unfortunately, there are people who acquire this type of animal as a companion or exotic animal and it may have escaped." Nothing more was heard of this fascinating case. I am only aware of white tigers and lions, and the cat looks far more like a panther – or a white house cat. *revistajaraysedal.es, 2 Jan 2023.*

The beast of Paliano (Frosinone, Italy) was of the common ABC variety. On the afternoon of 3 October 2023, a hunter in this region southeast of Rome saw a large cat-like animal close to the town, which is surrounded by fields and orchards. The hunter alerted police, who immediately started to search the region, joined by the Forestry Carabinieri and several animal rights associations. Then – silence. *frosinonetoday.it, 4 Oct 2023.*



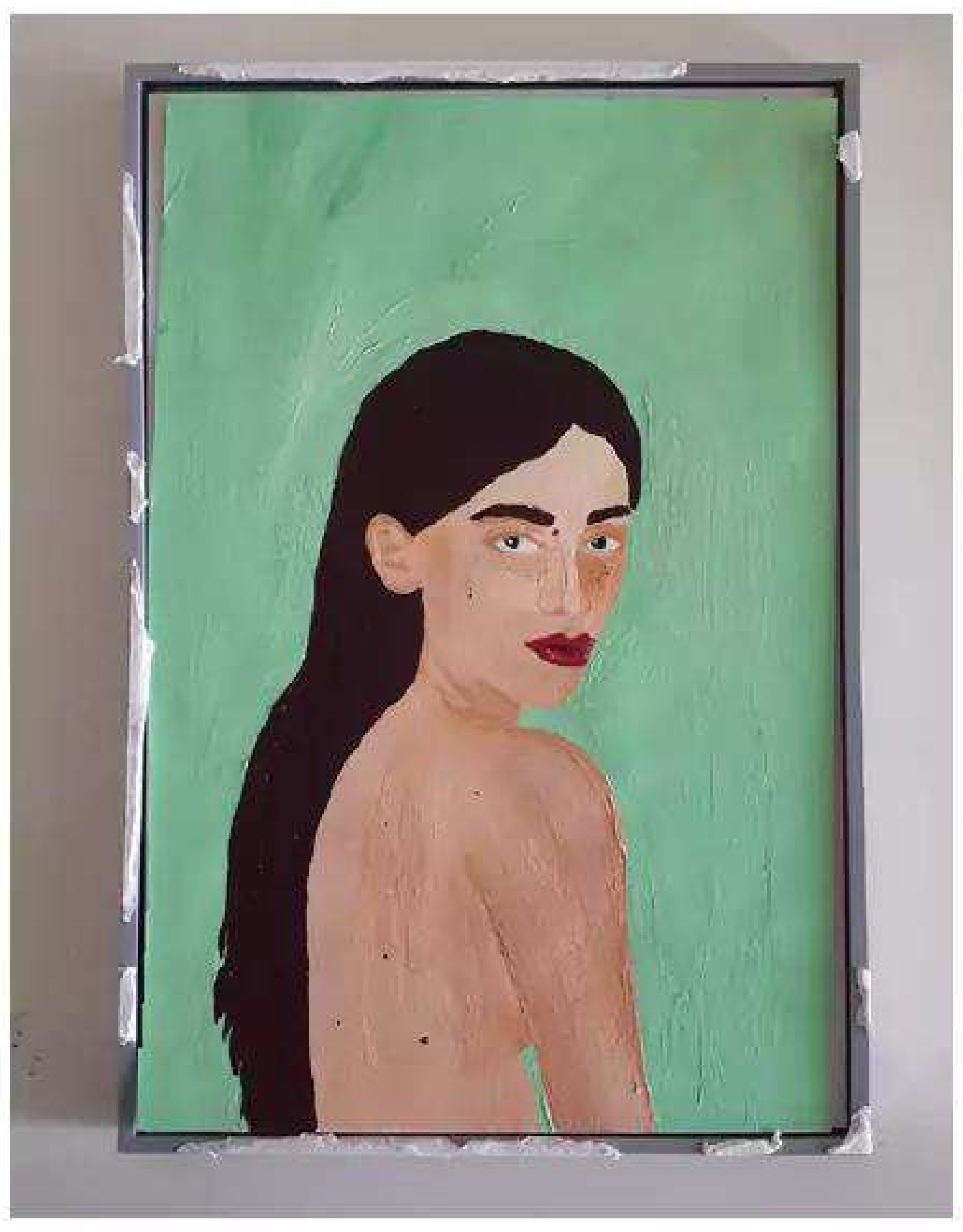
LEFT: The mystery white cat caught on video in Cádiz, Spain. **BELOW LEFT**: The painting that was smuggled into an exhibition in Bonn, Germany.

BUNDESKUNSTHALLE / TWITTER

CROCS AND DRAGONS

Big cats were not the only strange creatures around. In October 2023, at least one witness spotted a crocodile on the streets of San Giovanni Gemini, some 10 miles (16km) northwest of Agrigento in Sicily. The mayor, Dino Zimbardo, officially announced that the Public Health Agency of Casteltermini had informed him of the presence of an "animal similar to a crocodile" in the town's rural Mancuso district. He called all relevant agencies and asked residents to be on the alert until the crocodile was caught and handed over to the authorities. Mayor Zimbardo said: "The report comes from a person who appears to be reliable; moreover, he is a hunter. The Carabinieri informed the prefecture of the situation. The animal is described as crocodile-like and may have escaped from an owner who kept it illegally." After the initial sighting had been made, no further reports reached officials for 48 hours. That was the last I read of it.

Large lizards, often resembling the Alpine Tatzelwurm, have regularly been seen in Sicily. There was the "Syracuse Dragon" (Dec 1933-Jan 1934), a dragon with a cat's head attacking sheep at Fiumefreddo near Palermo (June 1954), a large snake in Syracuse (Aug 1954), the dragon of Noto (Oct 1954), a "small dinosaur" in Palermo (Oct 1965) and Messina's "mystery reptile" (June-July 1976). Apart from the crocodile, the most recent report I am aware of comes from 1993 when a "mysterious reptile" was spotted near Messina. *younipa.it, 16 Oct 2023.*



Danai had hidden the painting under her large hoodie

ART FOR ART'S SAKE

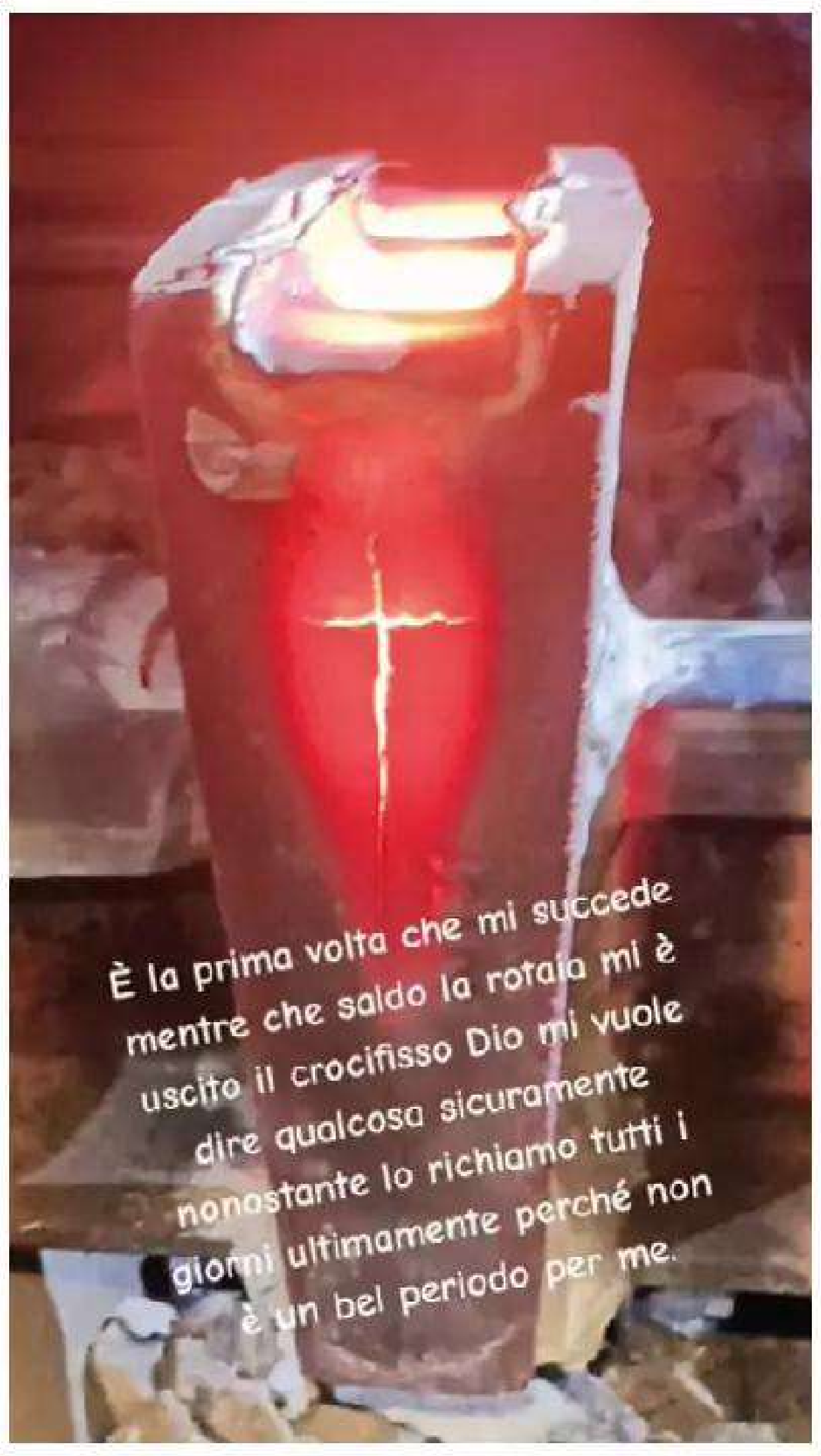
We are used to paintings disappearing from museums, but in this case, a picture was smuggled *into* an exhibition. When the show "Who We Are", which explored Germany as a country of immigration, ended at the Bundeskunsthalle (Federal Art Museum) in Bonn early in October 2023, it was noted that there was one painting more than had been hung for the opening. "It is something that hasn't happened to us before," said Johanna Adam, curator of the exhibition. "So one picture more in the exhibition is of course better than one picture less, something that luckily has not yet happened to us. But it was a big surprise."

The surplus painting was only some eight inches high and depicted an exotic-looking woman in strong colours. It was soon discovered that it had been smuggled into the show and fixed to the wall with tape. In a Twitter/X post, the Bundeskunsthalle asked the artist to come forward: "We think this is funny & would like to get into contact with the artist. So get in touch! There will no trouble. Word of honour!"

The artist Danai Emmanouilidis met the challenge and revealed her participation on Instagram. "I had always wanted to smuggle a picture into an exhibition," she said, explaining that she had hidden the painting under her large hoodie and added it soon after the opening. She did not choose the exhibition by chance: the topic of migration also plays a major role in her art. *Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger; faz.net, 13 Oct 2023.*

HEAVENS ABOVE!

On 25 April, the family of Mahmut Sahin in Elmshorn heard a sharp hiss and a dull thud and discovered a cosmic relic in their garden (**FT440:20**). "My wife was just sitting at the dining table with my daughter. The two of them went out into the garden and saw a real crater." And at the bottom of the crater was a stone about the size of a handball and weighing 3.7kg (8lb). "At first we didn't even think about a meteorite," said Mahmut. The family believed a gas pipe had burst, but Mahmut's daughter recalled that meteorites were magnetic. "She then got a magnet from the pin board – and it actually stuck to the stone." However,



È la prima volta che mi succede mentre che saldo la rotaia mi è uscito il crocifisso Dio mi vuole dire qualcosa sicuramente nonostante lo richiamo tutti i giorni ultimamente perché non è un bel periodo per me.

LEFT: Railway worker Michael Zanera posted this glowing cross on social media just hours before being killed in a tragic train accident.

MICHAEL ZANERA / TIKTOK

the stone in the Sahin's garden was only the largest of several pieces that were found over a larger area in the town. Experts who have now looked at the meteorite say it is the largest ever retrieved in Schleswig-Holstein and is possibly 4.5 billion years old. Meteorite expert Dieter Heinlein of the German Aerospace Center (DLR) said the stone was not shattered because the lawn into which it crashed was a soft surface. A collector offered 100,000 Euros for the cosmic projectile (meteorites belong to the discoverer under German law). However, as Mahmut said, "We fell in love with the stone a little bit. That's why we want to make it accessible to other people." They thought of donating it to a museum. Mahmut also noted that the family was lucky that the meteorite had missed them. "We had initially planned to build the house five metres further back… my son would have been just at the place where the meteorite hit." *ndr.de/nachrichten, 20 May 2023.*

AND THE DEPTHS BELOW!

Strange things appeared in the sea off Malaga, Spain, in the summer of 2023. One evening, local resident Ana Martínez was walking along La Malagueta beach (just east of the city centre and the port of Malaga) when she noticed a strange flash in the water. Intrigued, Ana moved closer and watched as a shiny object slowly "walked" from the depths. At first glance, it looked like some kind of metallic ship, with flashing lights illuminating its surface. Ana described its shape as "cylindrical, similar to a submarine, but much larger and without any identifying marks". She grabbed her cell phone and started filming while the object continued to rise without a sound. "The funny thing is that my cell phone had much interference and behaved strangely, it didn't record anything and for two days it was working poorly," said Ana. The strange object remained motionless almost at the surface of the sea, before it submerged suddenly "and disappeared without a trace". Ana was alone when she saw whatever she saw, although the beach must have had more than a single visitor, and the video she shot was blank. No additional evidence for the object came to light. However, the Seville edition of the newspaper *ABC* adds that "in recent years, there have been several reports of unknown lights in the sky and unexplained phenomena in the region. Some believers speculate that these sightings could be related to each other, forming part of a broader pattern of extra-terrestrial phenomena." However, it seems that this was the first sighting of an Unidentified Submerged Object (USO) in recent years. *sevilla.abc.es, 15 Oct 2023.*

Meanwhile, on the Atlantic coast of Spain, residents and tourists assembled on the quiet beach of Mazagón in Huelva on the evening of 13 October 2023 saw and filmed strange things over the sea. Some spoke of bright lights and unidentified flying objects, others talked about flashing lights that changed colour and moved at impressive speeds. María Sánchez, one of the witnesses, said: "I was walking along the seashore when suddenly I saw a very bright light in the sky. I thought it was a shooting star, but then it moved at impossible angles. I've never seen anything like this before." News of the incident quickly spread on social media, and UFO researchers flocked to the seaside town. One of them, Javier Martínez, explained: "We are treating this case seriously and professionally. We have interviewed numerous witnesses, collected data, and are analysing atmospheric and astronomical information from that night. Our goal is to reach an informed conclusion and provide answers to the community." Locals are divided – some are happy the tourist spot will become better known, others think the UFOs were only airplanes or drones. *huelvainformacion.es, 15 Oct 2023.*

A TRAGIC OMEN?

Italian railway maintenance worker Michael Zanera posted a photo on social media showing a glowing cross that had been produced by his welding work on tracks near Turin in northern Italy. "I think God certainly wants to tell me something," he wrote as a caption. This was the last post he ever sent. On 31 August 2023, just a few hours later, he was among five workers killed by a train running into the maintenance group at Brandizzo Station, 15 miles (24km) east of Turin, in what was called the worst railway accident in Italy for the last 10 years. *Kölner Stadt-Anzeiger, 1 Sept 2023.*

THERE WILL BE BLOOD

The only miracle I've ever witnessed with my own eyes was the liquefaction of the dried blood of St Januarius, which is kept in a glass viol in the Cathedral of Naples in Italy (**FT65:36-41, 350:8, 395:26**). On holiday and seeking refuge from the bustling city, I went into the Cathedral. With me were a group of some eight heavily-armed policemen with machine guns. They went to the communion rail, knelt down, and a priest handed the reliquary around. This created such an intense religious atmosphere that I didn't approach: the ritual was not for me, but for the faithful, and I did not want to intrude.

On 19 September 2023, the blood again liquefied – if it fails to do so, this is regarded as a bad omen. During the ceremony, Archbishop Domenico Battaglia showed the glass vessel to the audience, and the red clot became liquid, to the relief of all present. The liquefaction was first noted, or reported, in 1389, and from 1610 on this miracle happens three times a year, on 19 September (Saint Januarius's Day), on 16 December and on the Saturday before the first Sunday in May. The blood remains liquid for a certain period (I saw it more than three weeks after the May liquefaction), but then becomes dry again – until the next miracle happens. There are many chemical theories about what the red clot is, but there has never been an official examination.

The saint, Bishop Januarius, according to legend was beheaded at Pozzuoli near Naples in 305 during the persecutions of the Roman emperor Diocletian. *religion.orf.at, 20 Sept 2023.*

KARL SHUKER welcomes back a golden mole and sets a crytozoological puzzle to ponder

A GOLDEN RESULT!

Despite their name and their deceptively similar morphological appearance, not to mention their subterranean lifestyle, the golden moles of southern Africa are nowadays known to be only very distantly related zoologically to true moles, their similarities with the latter being due to evolutionary convergence. Instead, they belong to an exclusively African/Madagascan mammalian order, Afrosoricida, which also includes the otter shrews of Equatorial Africa and the Madagascar tenrecs. Although golden moles are found in a wide range of habitats, the most famous examples are the desert-dwelling species. Unable to create lasting burrows beneath this arid realm's fine, ever-shifting sands, they have evolved to 'swim' through the sands instead, aided by the lubricating gland-produced oil exuded all over their fur, giving it its shimmering gold, green, or even violet hue (depending upon the species).

JP LE ROUX / CREATIVE COMMONS

Due to remaining out of sight for much of their lives, however, golden moles are among the least-known of all mammals, and none more so until very recently than De Winton's golden mole *Cryptochloris winteri*, endemic to a single location on South Africa's west coast – the coastal sand dunes at Port Nolloth. This is where its type specimen was discovered, with the new species that it represented being formally described in 1907. Almost 30 years later, in 1936, what has long been deemed the last confirmed sighting of this inordinately elusive species was made, and it has since been written off by many researchers as extinct. Happily, however, not everyone gave up hope. This ostensibly lost species received welcome publicity recently when included in the conservation organisation Re:wild's '25 Most Wanted Lost Species' list, which led in 2021 to a concerted search for it in the Port Nolloth area by a team of investigators from the Endangered Wildlife Trust and Pretoria University using not only the latest eDNA (environmental DNA) technology, in which traces of golden mole DNA left behind in soil and sand by specimens were sought, procured, and tested, but also a tracker/sniffing dog that had been trained to specifically sniff out golden moles.

What made this particular search so intriguing, moreover, is that it had to be achieved not by direct matches but by exclusions. That is, at that time there was no DNA from this particular species available for comparison purposes with any golden mole eDNA obtained, nor was there any known specimen with which to specifically train the dog. So the search focused upon golden mole eDNA that did *not* match those of any golden mole species for whom DNA samples did exist, and upon golden mole activity that the dog did *not* react to. When a preserved but hitherto-overlooked specimen of De Winton's golden mole was unexpectedly uncovered in 2022 at Port Nolloth Museum, however, DNA samples taken from it were found to match the unidentified eDNA golden mole samples obtained in the field. Also, living golden moles obtained in locations that the dog had not responded to were found to be De Winton's golden moles. As announced in November 2023, after over 80 years this enigmatic creature had finally been rediscovered – a truly golden result! *https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10531-023-02728-2 24; www.rewild.org/news/the-signs-in-the-sand; www.telegraph.co.uk/world-news/2023/11/28/shimmering-mole-spotted-for-the-first-time-in-100-years/.*

TONGUE-TIED BY TWO-TONGUES!

From golden moles to mole-furred cryptids: in 1997, I included the following account in my book *From Flying Toads To Snakes With Wings*, hoping that some reader might be able to propose an identity for the mysterious creatures described, as I was thoroughly perplexed by them – but no one ever did. Consequently, I can only assume that these cryptids left them as taxonomically tongue-tied as they have done with me. Nor have I ever uncovered any additional information concerning them. So now, 26 years later, I am reprinting my account here, as a crypto-riddle to ponder over New Year, just in case it does elicit a solution from someone this time:

On 27 May 1939, *Modern Wonder* documented some 'ultra-mysterious' mammals, allegedly captured by a photographer in the Malayan jungles and later observed by bemused officials in Manila, in the Philippines. Each of the beasts (of unrecorded number) was described as being quadrupedal, weighing about 200 pounds [90kg], covered in a furry, mole-like pelage, with a raccoon-like head, a pair of owl-like eyes and odd dentition – some of its teeth resembled a man's, others were cat-like – plus a fondness for bananas. Except for their extremely heavy weight (an error on the part of the original report?), there would seem to be a chance of identifying them with some known animal type – until, that is, their most distinctive characteristic is revealed.

For the description also stated that each of these beasts had two tongues! Furthermore, it alleged that they never drank, because they absorbed all of the moisture that they required directly through their skins. This is generally a feature of certain animals living in water or in moist habitats, but the animals concerned are normally amphibians, fishes, and lower life forms, not mammals. Conversely, it is true that many desert-dwelling rodents rarely if ever drink water, because they obtain it from their food (e.g. juicy plant tissues) or from metabolic water released as they digest the dry components of their diet, but they do not absorb water through their skins.

In general appearance (and excluding weight), they are reminiscent of some of the lesser-known, mask-faced forms of Malay civet and badger – elusive, short-furred creatures of nocturnal lifestyle and partial to fruit within their largely omnivorous diet. Moreover, the owl-like eyes call to mind the tarsiers – those orb-eyed, sucker-fingered, lemur-like primates indigenous to southeast Asia (including the Malay Archipelago), and sufficiently strange in appearance to those not familiar with these rarely-seen nocturnal creatures to attract surprise and newspaper attention. Even so, none of those identities can reconcile the mystery beasts' two tongues and the ability to absorb moisture directly through their skins. Could these attributes have been based upon misunderstanding or mistranslation, rather than upon reality? As nothing more is on record regarding the photographer's mystifying finds, there is no way of knowing.

So there it is, the owl-eyed, two-tongued, never-drinking plantain-eater (which scans satisfyingly like the one-eyed, one-horned, flying purple people eater immortalised in a classic 1958 Sheb Wooley novelty song and 30 years later in a 1988 family movie directly inspired by it!). Any thoughts or suggestions as to this exceedingly curious cryptid's possible identity, or any extra reports/information regarding it, would be very gratefully received. Karl PN Shuker: *From Flying Toads To Snakes With Wings* (1997).

THE CONSPIRASPHERE

As a public inquiry seeks to examine the UK's response to the Covid-19 pandemic, **NOEL ROONEY** finds that the conspirasphere is more than ready to offer explanations of its own...

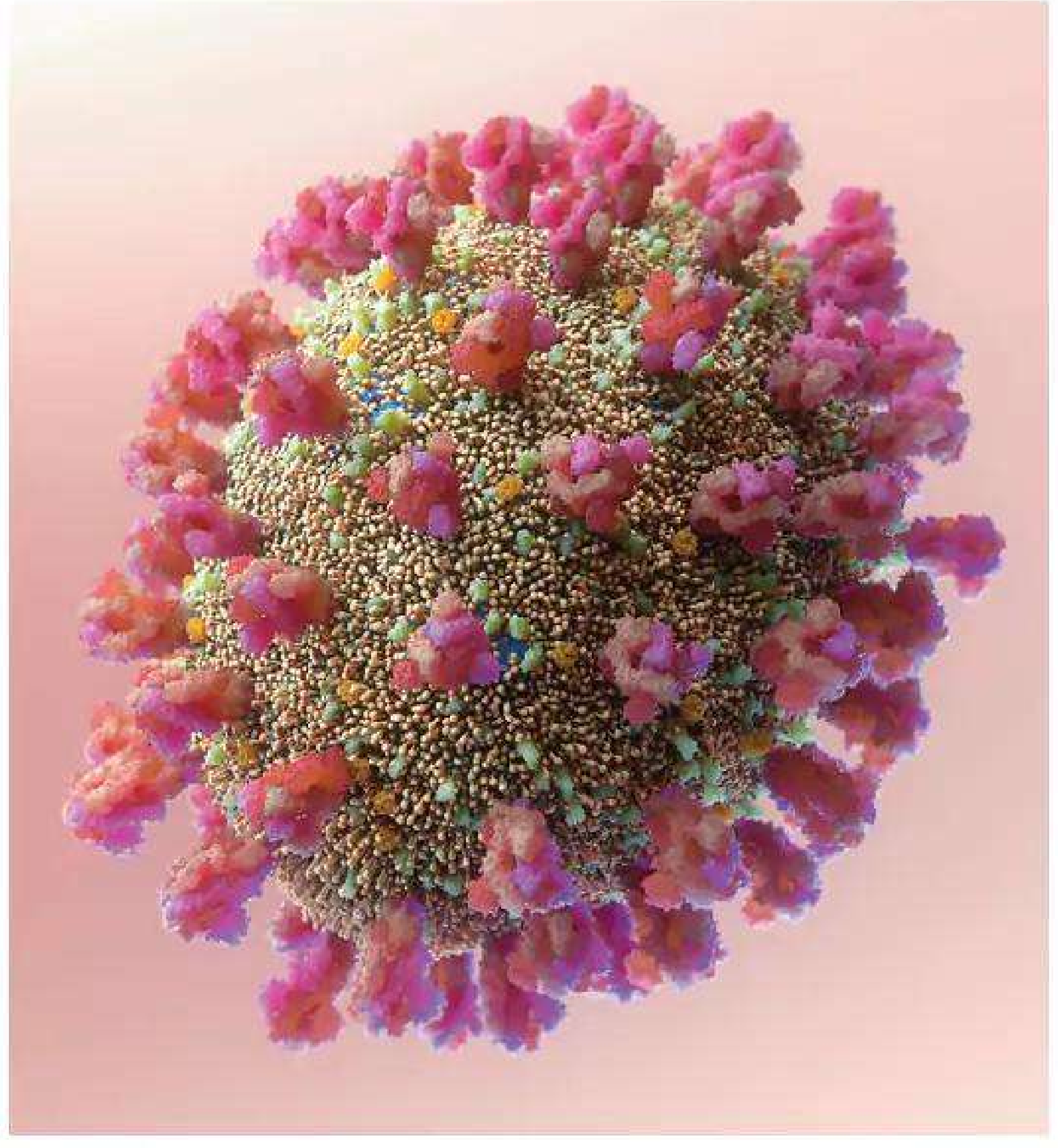
INQUIRING MINDS

The Hallett Inquiry into the UK Government's response to the Covid scare has excited a fair amount of interest among the sceptics and conspiratorially minded. Responses range from the mildly amused — "Well, they would say that" — to the outraged — "It's a cover-up of the cover-up". It feels, from all the comment being generated, as if a number of parallel inquiries are going on at the same time.

One particular contribution to the inquiry, from Professor Dame Jenny Harries, now head of the UK Health Security Agency (not that calling a public health body a security authority should raise any concern) excited a mini conspiracy theory in its own right. Dame Harries said, in her evidence, that there was no strong evidence for the efficacy of wearing masks to prevent transmission of a virus. At that moment, allegedly, the BBC coverage was abruptly switched off. The Powers That Be, it seemed, were still trying to stifle the Truth at every opportunity.

Some sceptical commentators pointed out that Harries, unlike some of the participants, was at least consistent; she had expressed doubts about masks quite early in 2020, so scored high on the hindsight scale. A few promoted her to the ranks of the angels, as proven by the craven attempt to silence her testimony; if the mainstream media (MSM) don't like you, you're one of us.

The nested furores generated by the Hallett Inquiry led me to thinking about the alternative explanations offered by various sectors of the C-sphere. Much of the conspiracist contribution to the Covid controversy can be summed up as "Bill Gates did it"; Mr Gates did seem to have a level of influence on both public opinion and policy making that is hard to square with expertise in making small computers, certainly. And, of course, there was Bill and the vaccine; that rabbit hole is too well travelled to require comment, though I would offer in Bill's defence that he came out publicly, when the Omicron variant became dominant, and said that the mild variant had usurped the vaccine in efficacy.



At that moment, allegedly, the BBC coverage was switched off

What struck me most strongly as I trawled through the various schools of conspiracist thought was that the Conspirasphere has not just migrated into the mainstream in recent years; it has also accumulated some of the MSM's habits and attributes. I found myself dividing the theories into tabloid and broadsheet; not as a measure of verity versus outlandishness, so much as a rough index of attitude.

In pre-digital times (remember those days?) the tabloid end of conspiracism hardly featured; how could it, when there was no vehicle to hand for instant broadcasting of opinion unfettered by the mundane limitations of evidence? The more perspicuous among you have probably noticed that such an observation applies rather more broadly than the confines of the C-sphere; the Internet could be said to have obviated the antiquated notion of truth across the board, but that's another story.

I will write more about this little addition to the taxonomy of conspiracy theory at some point, but for now I'd like to introduce you to my favourite alternative theory about the Covid response, and indeed the origins of the whole flap (a term I use advisedly in the circumstances). It goes like this:

Western governments, particularly the US (and, so rumour has it, the UK and others) have outsourced their bio-weapons research, often to rather surprising locations. Some of you will recall the fuss over such facilities in Ukraine, for instance. China is prominent among these remote sources. So, when the news broke that a novel virus had appeared in Wuhan, of all places, alarm bells rang; Wuhan was ground zero for virus manipulation endeavours. The official Chinese response made the bells ring all the louder.

What worried those folks in the know was the possibility (somehow confirmed by the stringent Chinese lockdown, for all the wrong reasons as it transpires) that one of 'our' monsters had escaped on 'their' territory. An accidental outbreak of biological warfare, the nightmare scenario, appeared to be happening. The videos proved it; people were dropping dead in the street.

As a result, the co-ordination of response to the possible pandemic of an artificially enhanced virus was quickly taken over by the security apparatus; the belated revelation that the Department of Defense was in charge of Covid policy in the US is taken as evidence for this. Many of the people who took centre stage during the crisis had connections to national security; some of them had attended the Event 201 pandemic simulation exercise in October 2019, further cementing the sense that this was more about security than public health.

Social distancing, masks, drastic treatment protocols, quarantine camps and vaccine passports; in this rendition, all of the above are responses to something far more sinister than a pandemic (by now a contentious term) caused by a virus generally known to cause colds and the occasional flu. There had to be something else, something more, going on.

National security wields a sword with many edges. Western panic, it is suggested, was a prime opportunity for Chinese disinformation. They could just sow the panic and let the West destroy itself, Sun Tzu style. Thus the videos (clearly staged, unless people in Hazmat suits are a regular feature of the Chinese public transport system); and thus the stringent lockdown, which, as independent Chinese commentators pointed out, bore an uncanny resemblance to official counter-insurgency protocols. Some described the whole process as a medical coup d'état, with a laughing Chinese Buddha in the shadows.

The Hallett Inquiry is unlikely to pursue this line. But then, like Auntie Beeb switching off at inopportune moments, the C-sphere will probably take that as evidence they are right.

www.michaelpsenger.com/p/the-unwitting-coup-was-the-response

WEIRD WAR STORIES

Russian soldiers fighting in Ukraine turn to shamans and talismans, while US veterans are plagued by ghosts

HOLY WAR IN UKRAINE

With the war in Ukraine gaining a reputation as a meatgrinder for tens of thousands of inexperienced and undertrained conscripts, Russian soldiers are increasingly relying on mystic protection to keep them safe on the battlefield, and tales of miracles abound. It is now common for soldiers' medical packs to include spiritual protection kits, distributed by the Tomsk branch of the All-Russian People's Front. These contain a cloth ribbon, usually black, but sometimes blue or khaki, with words from the 90th psalm sewn onto it, reading "He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High"; a consecrated cross (preferably brass; apparently aluminium ones break too easily) with a thread to hang it from; and a paper icon, often of Saint George the Victorious, with protective prayers on the back. According to Tatyana Loginova, who works distributing the kits, the Tomsk clergy "discovered" the magical properties of ribbons in June 2022 when a soldier whose mother had sent him some was caught in an ambush: "The enemy fired a shot at that guy with the ribbons, and the bullet changed its trajectory and, instead of killing him, flew in the other direction. The AFU even stopped shooting, their jaws dropped. This happened to him several times."

ИЛЬЯ МУРОМЕЦ
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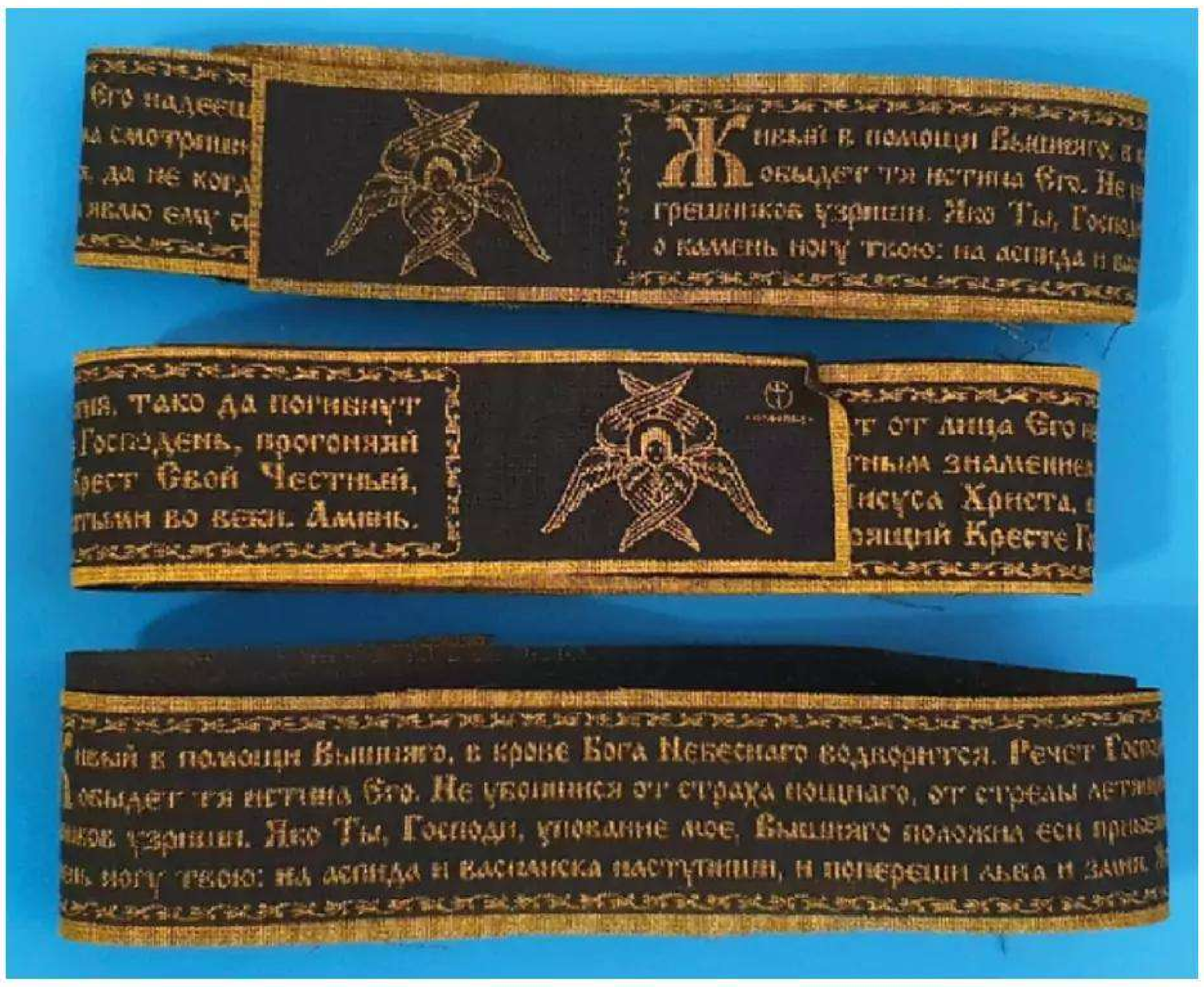


CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Buryat talismans; Oleg Bulutov, who is sending shamans and yurts to the border; Orthodox ribbons bearing the text of the 90th Psalm; the badge of the Saint Ilya Muromets Battalion.

ARKADY ZARUBIN / CREATIVE COMMONS

For soldiers from the east of Russia, Buddhist amulets known as "Dugar Garzhama" are popular, according to Balzhinima Tsyrenov from the Tsugol Datsan, the oldest Buddhist monastery in the Trans-Baikal region. "This amulet has a mantra for all war gods. Baron Ungern (the Russian conqueror of Mongolia) always charged into battle ahead of his hundred, but bullets never got him because he wore the *Dugar Garzhama* around his neck. After the battle, he would take off his *terlig* with general's epaulettes, and bullets would rain down from him," said Tsyrenov. Originally, the *Dugar Garzhama* was a bronze plate, but modern versions are a laminated card which the Buddhists are happy to distribute to all Russian fighters, not just the Buddhist ones, as all will be protected equally. Attesting to the amulet's effectiveness, Tsyrenov said "We had a man at our *datsan* who decided to test *Dugar Garzhama*. He hung it around a goat's neck, tethered the animal, and instructed two colonel-hunters to shoot at it from a distance of one and a half meters. Astonishingly, the goat emerged without a single scratch! Our comrades who perished in the Special Military Operation must have simply lacked these talismans."

Not to be left out, shamans from the Buryat religion have also got into the protective talisman business, taking three shamanic yurts, complete with shamans, to Rostov, close to the Ukraine border, where they can minister to soldiers. Oleg Bulutov, from the Hun Foundation, who provided the yurts, says that having shamans to hand is important because "a person might witness something during warfare that causes their spirit to waver. It must be brought back. A person cannot endure for long without their spirit." The shamans also provide protective packages, which include magical items like soil from revered sites in small bags and silver and copper amulets. Presenting evidence for their effectiveness, Bulutov says "a Russian soldier recounted an incident: Buryats advanced into battle alongside him, and he witnessed a massive horse galloping above them, guarding them. He promptly informed his mother, 'Mom, quick, bring me an amulet from Buryatia'." Anthropologist Alexandra Arkhipova is familiar with this story. "It's a narrative of a Mongol or Buryat heading to war, with numerous variations spanning conflicts from the 19th century to World War II. They take a pebble from *obos*, a ritual ensemble of stones and branches. Amid the battle, they perceive an immense horse or a rider on horseback guiding soldiers into the fray or, conversely, rescuing them from the battle."

While religious amulets provide individual protection for soldiers, at an institutional level increasing numbers of military units are taking on the names of saints. Units include the Rostov Saint George Motorised Rifle Battalion and the Saint Ilya Muromets Battalion. In the occupied part

LANCE CPL. ZACHERY LANING

LEFT: US Marines fire an M777 Howitzer during a mission in northern Syria in March 2017.

of the Zaporizhzhia region, there is a battalion named after Apostle Andrew the First-Called and there is a Saint Seraphim of Sarov Motorised Rifle Battalion recruiting in Nizhny Novgorod. If a unit is named after a saint, it is believed that it benefits from their mystical protection, with propagandist Dmitry Steshin publishing an article entitled "We Named Our Battalion After Saints – And There Are No Heavy Losses Anymore".

In Russian media, particularly on Orthodox websites, reports of wartime miracles, sometimes resulting from the use of amulets, are frequent. In one example, "an icon of the Mother of God standing in a trench protected the soldiers. A shell exploded nearby, and the shrapnel flew not towards them but to the right and left of them". The newspaper *Argumenty and Fakty* reported on a soldier from Samara saved from shrapnel by a Virgin Mary patch on his uniform – not in the usual sense of Bibles stopping bullets, but by making the shrapnel swerve round him, leaving him untouched. The BVM has also made a personal appearance, leaving an image on the doors of a military hospital. According to popular military priest Svyatoslav Churkanov, "A month ago, doctors fought very hard for the life of one young guy in this military hospital, but this time, there was no miracle. He died on the operating table. At the moment of his death, the image of the Virgin Mary appeared on all glass doors leading from the first to the sixth floor to the intensive care unit room." As these narratives are being actively promoted by state media, not just circulating among soldiers, it seems likely they are part of a strategy to frame the conflict as a holy war, and one in which God is on Russia's side.

SYRIAN BLAST DEMONS

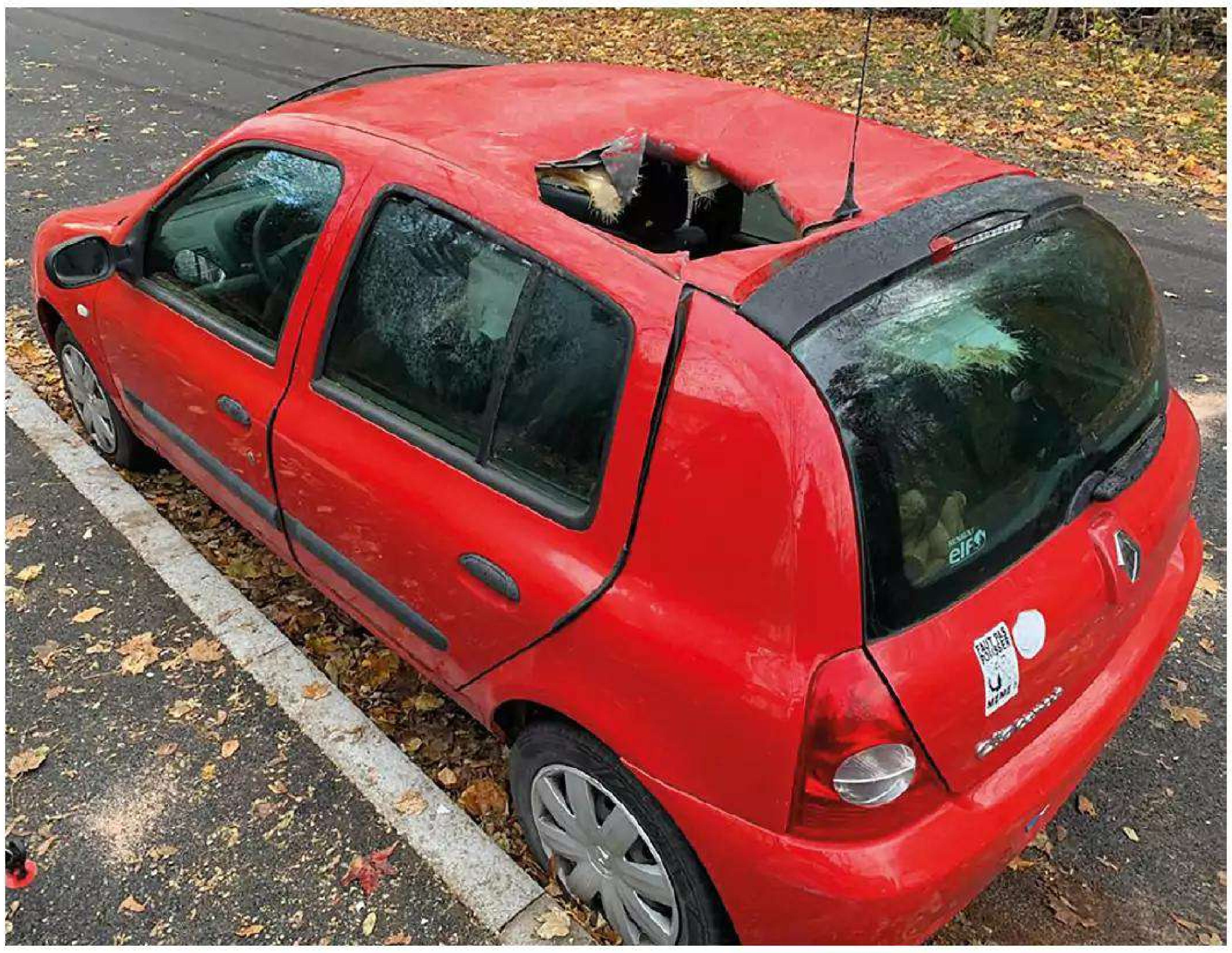
The US took a different approach to protecting its troops during their limited deployment fighting Isis in Syria. Rather than throwing them into close combat with magic talismans for protection, they avoided direct engagement. Instead, they made extensive use of long-range artillery, located miles away from the enemy, and pounded them relentlessly with explosives, day after day. This involved a small number of troops firing tens of thousands of rounds in a short, concentrated period. While these soldiers were 15 miles (24km) away from the nearest enemy, and military guidelines say that firing such a quantity of shells is safe, after they came home, it was clear something had gone very wrong.

Large numbers of artillerymen suffered PTSD, despite having had no contact with the enemy. There were many suicides and an epidemic of physical, psychological, and neurological disorders. More disturbing was what soldiers reported they were seeing. On returning home, Lance Corporal Javier Ortiz walked into his kitchen to find the ghost of a dead girl standing in the dark, pale and corpse-like, covered in chalky dust as if from an explosion, and fixing him with a dark, intense stare. Considerably shaken by this vision, Ortiz backed away into another room and switched on the lights, expecting her to vanish. She didn't. Ortiz later attempted to cleanse himself by burning mementoes from his service on a beach, but the phantom persisted. Eventually, he was seized by visions that ghosts were trying to pull him into another dimension, which he managed to fend off by smoking marijuana, but the ghost girl still follows him, and he says he now sees other things too, but won't elaborate. Another soldier, Brandon Mooney, suffered depression and contemplated suicide having been tormented with repeated visions of a black demon standing over his bed, while Andrew Johnson came back with a noticeable delay in his speech, nightmares, and was continually seeing inexplicable flashes of light around him. Over time, these became more coherent, and he started to see shadows cast by streetlights crawling towards him, first as brief flickers on the edge of his vision, then as full hallucinations of creatures moving in the darkness. Speaking to a journalist about his condition on the phone, he said "Now they are very close, like at arm's length, and very real, honestly, I see it right now, and it's freaking me out."

Medical investigations could find nothing obviously wrong with the men, but for months they had been exposed to shattering forces. Even modern field guns are still loaded manually and fired by pulling a cord, and the gun crew have the shockwave from every detonation ripple through their bodies at the speed of sound. Do this for 20 hours a day and the potential for damage is huge. To investigate, researchers exposed mice to blasts, watched their behaviour and then examined their brains. After even a single exposure, the mice's ability to build nests collapsed, leaving them only capable of making ramshackle, unfinished structures, and their ability to navigate mazes fell dramatically. On a large scale, nothing untoward could be seen when their brains were dissected, but at a cellular level microscopic damage was devastating. It is difficult to say whether this would translate to human brains; as brain injury expert Dr Scott Cota says, "It's very hard to study, and unfortunately, we can only do it post-mortem at this point", although such damage would certainly be a plausible cause for many of the soldiers' afflictions. *theins.ru, 19 Sept; nytimes.com, 5 Nov 2023.*

OUT OF THE HEAVENS

Cosmic rays, parachuting spiders, meteorite trashes car, and an Irish impact that wasn't...



BEN STOKES / CREATIVE COMMONS

ABOVE LEFT: It seems likely that a meteorite punched its way through the roof of this Renault Clio. **ABOVE RIGHT**: The Middle Drum facility of Utah's Telescope Array,

ATTACK THE BLOCK?

At around 8am on 20 November, emergency services in the Stockfeld area of Strasbourg in France were called to the Rue de la Lisiere following reports of "smoke coming from a car". What they found was a small red Renault Clio with a massive hole, 50cm (20 in) wide, in its roof. On further investigation, it became clear that whatever had slammed through the roof had also punched a hole in the vehicle's floor and petrol tank and come out the other side, so must have hit the car at considerable speed. Bafflingly, though, the offending object was nowhere to be found. "Either it's so small that we can't find it, or the impact was so strong that the object disintegrated and turned to dust," said Matthieu Colobert, the captain of the firefighting team that attended the scene. Tests for radioactivity came up negative, and a regional fire brigade spokesperson said, "Following reconnaissance by the first team, we suspect the fall of a stellar body" – in other words, the car had been hit by a meteorite. The spokesperson went on to say that a piece of gravel about two centimetres wide had been discovered near the scene, described as "a chestnut-sized rock that's light and that looks like burnt wood." It was thought this might have caused the damage, so it was being sent to Paris for further examination. On social media, some locals claimed to have seen something streak across the sky just before the incident, but so far, no official meteor sighting has been confirmed. While a meteorite striking a car is an extremely rare occurrence, it is not unprecedented. In 1992, a 27lb (12kg) meteorite totalled a 1980 Chevy Malibu in New York after hitting it at 164mph (264kph). Having bought the car for $400, post impact the owner sold it for $25,000, and the meteorite for a further $50,000; both have subsequently been displayed in museums. *express.co.uk, 20 Nov; autoblog.com, 22 Nov 2023.*

COSMIC WHAMMY

The massive Telescope Array, which has more than 500 detectors spread across 300 square miles (777km^2) of desert in Utah, is designed to detect cosmic rays hitting the Earth from deep space and is run by a consortium of international universities. They have now announced that the Array has detected one of the highest energy cosmic rays ever seen. Its trace was found in data collected in 2021, but not fully analysed until now. The particle has been given the name Amaterasu after the Sun goddess in Japanese mythology and had an energy exceeding 240 exa-electron volts (EeV), millions of times the energy that can be reached by the Large Hadron Collider. While the cosmic ray was a sub-atomic particle – like most cosmic rays, this was probably a proton – it was packing energy equivalent to a golf ball travelling at 95mph (153kph) or someone dropping a brick onto their toe from waist height. The only particle ever detected that was more powerful than Amaterasu is known as the "Oh-My-God particle" and slammed into a cosmic ray detector at the Dugway Proving Ground, also in Utah, with an energy of 320 EeV on 15 October 1991. The energy carried by this one was about equivalent to that of a 1 kg mass dropped from a medium-sized building. There is a mystery as to how particles like these originate. "Things that people think of as energetic, like supernova, are nowhere near energetic enough for this," said Professor John Matthews, of the University of Utah, who co-authored the paper announcing Amaterasu's discovery. "You need huge amounts of energy, really high magnetic fields, to confine the particle while it gets accelerated", he said, adding "That's the mystery of this – what the heck is going on?". A potential source would be a supermassive black hole at the heart of another galaxy, but tracing the path of Amaterasu back to source reveals it apparently came from an area in deep space known as the Local Void, which seems to be empty of any such sources, or, indeed, anything at all. The Oh-My-God Particle also seemed to have no discernible origin. Scientists think this means that either there is an undiscovered source in the Local Void, or that the particles experienced much more magnetic deflection than expected. As cosmic rays head towards us through space, their

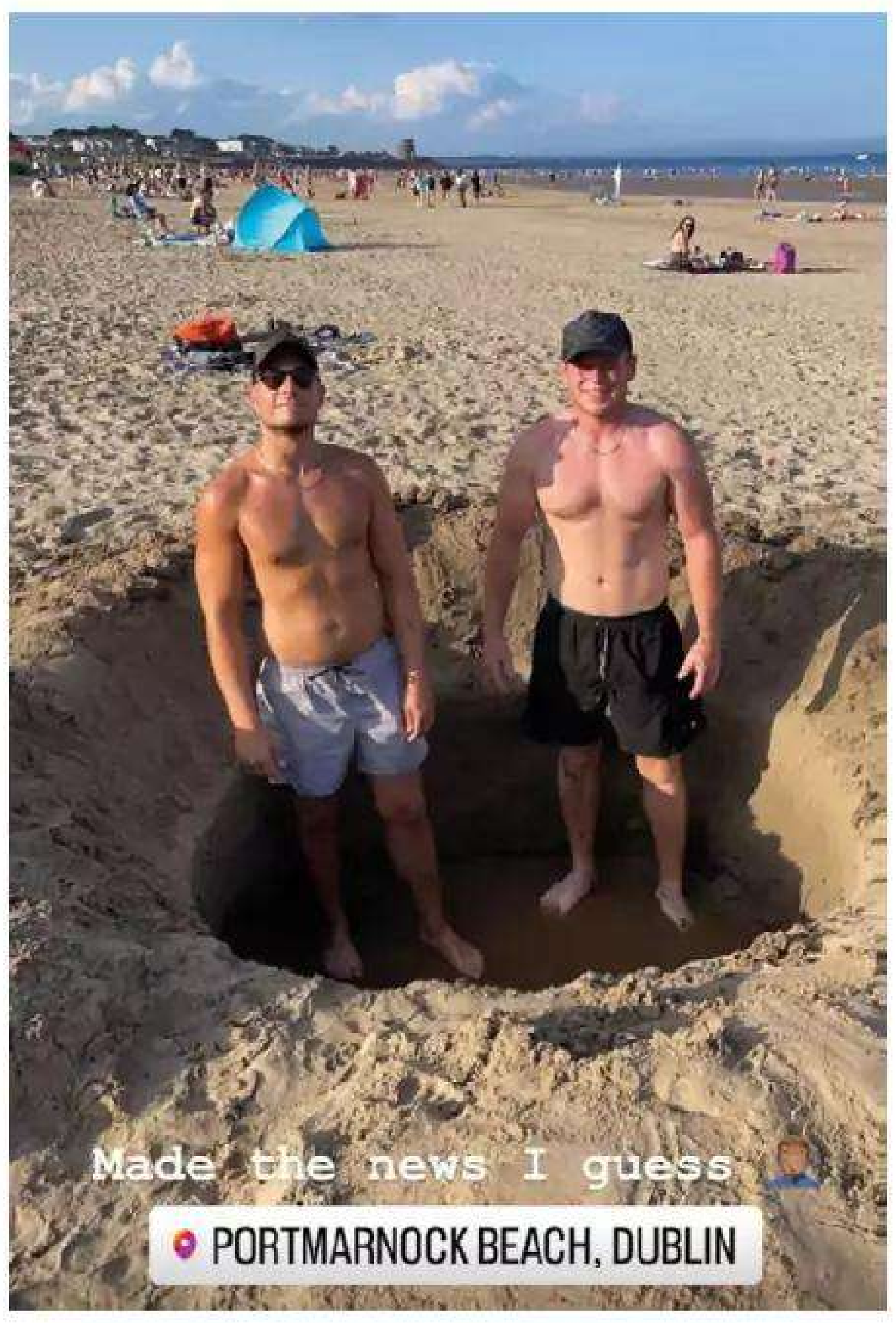
VIRGIN MEDIA NEWS / TWITTER

ABOVE: Amateur astronomer David Kennedy and the "mysterious hole". **RIGHT**: Two lads with a beach spade.

path is altered by magnetic sources along the way, but it is currently thought that a particle such as Amaterasu or the "Oh-My-God particle" would have too much energy to experience significant deflection. It may also mean we have an incomplete understanding of high-energy particle physics. *theguardian.com, 24 Nov 2023.*

HOLE LOT OF NOTHING

There was considerable excitement in Ireland after a stone discovered in a "mysterious hole" on Portmarnock beach, Dublin, on 12 September was claimed to be a meteorite by local amateur astronomer David Kennedy. He had found the hole while walking his dog and said the crater was potentially the result of a "once-in-a-lifetime cosmic event". "I knew immediately that it was an impact site", Kennedy said, explaining that he believed the stone he found in the hole came from space because of "the actual weight of it and its density – you're definitely going to have to get it checked out." However, footage swiftly emerged of two men digging the hole the previous day, leading to a community note being added to Kennedy's claims on Twitter/X stating: "It is in fact not a cosmic event, instead it was dug out the day before by two lads with a beach spade." Undeterred, Kennedy said that he was disappointed, but was still getting the rock analysed in the hopes that it wasn't a completely fruitless discovery. *huffpost.com, 15 Sept; BBC News, 19 Sept 2023.*



SKY SPIDERS

Meanwhile, arachnophobes in northern California have been alarmed by people reporting spiders falling from the sky and large clumps of stringy spiderwebs appearing above their heads. Rather than some sort of arachnid invasion from space, the phenomenon is actually fairly common and known as 'ballooning'; it involves baby spiders sending out strands of silk from their bodies, forming mini-parachutes that allow them to transport themselves to new locations, sometimes over considerable distances, using the wind. *BBC News, 10 Oct 2023.*

MYTHCONCEPTIONS

by Mat Coward

275: ABSINTHE OF PROOF

HUNT EMERSON

ILLUSTRATIONS BY HUNT EMERSON

The myth

Proper, old-fashioned absinthe was killer stuff. It caused hallucinations and homicidal manias. The modern version is a feeble imitation of the original because it contains so little of the dangerous active ingredient, thujone.

The "truth"

Like most distilled drinks, absinthe began as a medicine. Wormwood is its most important medical ingredient, while aniseed and fennel provide its characteristic flavour and colour. Its bad rep began in the 1840s, when colonial French soldiers in Algiers were issued with absinthe to protect them against dysentery. Many developed a taste for "the green fairy," and continued to drink it, recreationally, back home. As its popularity spread, not only to the artistic community but also to the lower classes, so a moral panic grew a round it. Terrifying stories of its evil effects led to it being banned during the late 19th and early 20th centuries in France, Switzerland, the USA and several other countries. Around the turn of the next century, absinthe was gradually re-legalised. Today, it is considered no more harmful (to the drinker or to social order) than any other strong booze. Its supposed hallucinogenic properties stand entirely debunked, while "absinthism" is considered simply alcoholism, not a separate disease. As for the post-ban drink being a weak emulation of the traditional formula: analysis of vintage absinthes shows that the old and the new contain similar levels of thujone – and that those are so low as to be negligible.

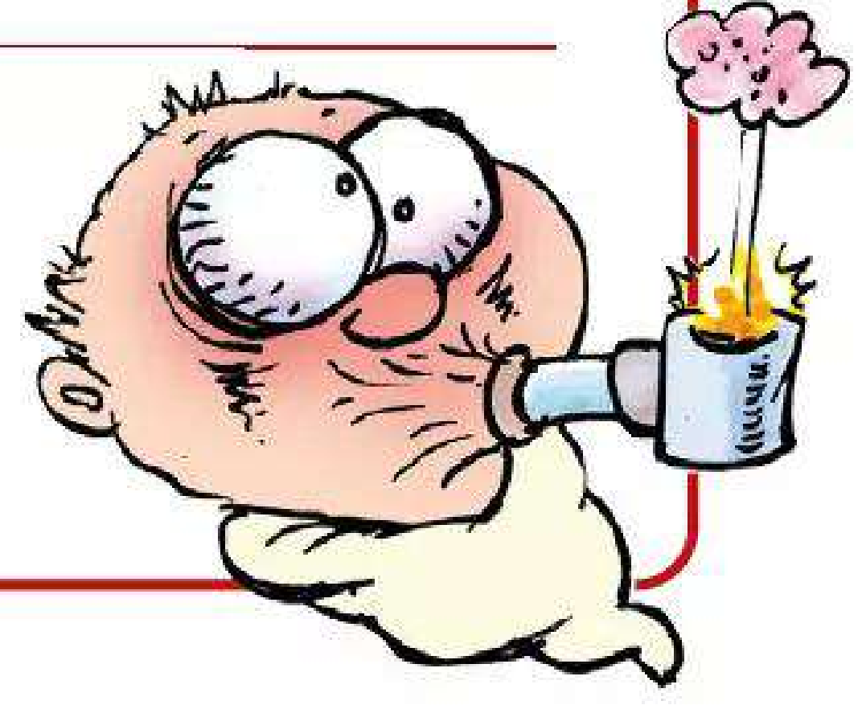
Sources *The Perfect Tonic*, by Camper English (William Collins, 2022); https://cen.acs.org/articles/86/i18/Absinthe-Myths-Finally-Laid-Rest.html; https://sciencehistory.org/stories/magazine/the-devil-in-a-little-green-bottle-a-history-of-absinthe

Disclaimer

After working on this column, Mat and Hunt lost 48 hours and awoke with their Wellingtons covered in strawberry jam. While they recover, please send any corrections to the letters column.

Mythchaser

Speaking of moral panics – whatever happened to the "crack babies" epidemic predicted by anti-drug crusaders in the 1980s?



Data-driven

NIGEL WATSON rounds up the latest news and views from the world of ufology

YEAR OF THE UAP

2023 proved to be a busy year for UAP research and disclosure. Things kicked off with the Chinese balloon that was eventually shot down by USAF fighter jets over the coast of South Carolina on 4 February, followed by three further UAP shoot-downs of what were probably US civilian balloons. Although all of them were quickly identified as being of a terrestrial origin, it did underline the fact that unusual or unexpected aerial objects could invade US airspace (**FT430:28-29**, **432:13**).

To tackle that problem, the All-Domain Anomaly Resolution Office (AARO) is leading the official US effort "to document, analyse, and when possible, resolve UAP reports using a rigorous scientific framework and a data-driven approach" in coordination with other government agencies. In their annual report, released on 17 October, AARO noted they received 274 UAP reports from 31 August 2022 to 30 April 2023 and a further 17 that occurred between 2019 and 2022.

Their website carries links for currently serving and past government or military personnel to report their UAP sightings, along with reporting trends and information about AARO's goals. See *www.aaro.mil*

SPACED OUT

NASA's UAP study team, which unlike AARO is not looking into historical cases, published its first report on 14 September. So far, and not surprisingly, they have found no evidence of UAP having an extraterrestrial origin, although NASA chief Bill Nelson did concede that he personally believes aliens are out there. Vicente-Juan Ballester Olmos in his critique of the report, "UFOs and NASA: There is No Reliable Data, But We Still Want to Investigate Them", takes issue with their statement that: "Recently, many credible witnesses, often military aviators, have reported seeing objects they did not recognise over US airspace. Most of these events have since been explained, but a small handful cannot be immediately identified as known human-made or natural phenomena."

These 'recent' witnesses, Olmos points out, are from the US Navy and are believers in extraterrestrial UFOs – and their leaked stories/videos helped form the AARO in the first place. It is his view that they are not typical of the subject in general: "These cases, which have been strongly questioned by sceptical, scientific analysts, do not represent the 'true' UFO phenomenon, if one even exists. These were sightings by pilots, out of the hundreds collected, that essentially differ from the type of occurrences that has led to the popular consciousness of extraterrestrial UFOs: close encounters, landings, presence of humanoids, and abductions. NASA has no idea about those. And what it also ignores is the psychological and sociological perspective of the 'phenomenon' and the mediocre reliability of human testimony."

ABOVE: David Marler of NUFOHRC with some of the UFO records he aims to preserve for the future.

Tim Printy, editor of *SUNlite* e-magazine thinks NASA being involved with UAP research is a mistake because "NASA cannot win. If they don't investigate UAP reports that become 'headline' news, they will be accused of not doing enough. If they set up sensors across the country and do not record an alien spaceship, they will be accused of wasting resources by Congress and not setting up enough stations (which means more resources) by UAP proponents. Anything short of stating they have evidence of alien visitation will be criticised by ufology. It is the 'UFO quagmire' that Blue Book was stuck in for over 20 years. In his unpublished manuscript, Hector Quintanilla indicated why the command staff wanted to shut down Blue Book after the Condon study. "The Project was a drain on space, money, engineering, talent, clerical help, and it subjected the organisation to unwanted publicity." How long will it take for NASA and DOD to come up with the same conclusion?

www.academia.edu/107167561/UFOs_and_NASA_There_is_No_Reliable_Data_But_We_Still_Want_to_Investigate_Them; www.astronomyufo.com/UFO/SUNlite.htm

PRESERVING UFO RECORDS

UFO research and data has been collected by individuals and civilian groups for many decades, but much of this valuable information is often dumped when the group dissolves or when a researcher dies (sadly that was the fate of ufologist Robert Moore's files only recently; see **FT433:31**).

It is tricky deciding on the best place to put your old files. A long time ago I gave copies of my Scunthorpe UFO files to the local library, which I thought was safe until a few years later someone told me the files were destroyed when the library was flooded.

Since then most of my UFO books, magazines and files have been collected by Clas Svahn on one of his annual rescue missions to the UK. He ships them to the Archives For the Unexplained (AFU) based in Norrköping, Sweden (**FT330:46-49**), which I hope does not get flooded!

Another major physical archive is the National UFO Historical Records Center (NUFOHRC) run by David Marler in the USA (**FT432:51**). Their most recent acquisition is of 13 filing cabinets and 60 boxes of research files from the Aerial Phenomena Research Organization (APRO). This was one of the world's largest collections and is estimated to contain 15,000 UFO cases, and is the legacy of the groups' founders Jim and Coral Lorenzen (see p.51 for more). NUFOHRC is also the home to Dr J Allen Hynek's original US Air Force Project Blue Book files and those of the National Investigations Committee on Aerial Phenomena (NICAP), and the Center for UFO Studies (CUFOS). NUFOHRC hopes to create a permanent base in Albuquerque, New Mexico, where the files will be accessible to the public.

In the UK, John Hanson self-publishes the *Haunted Skies* series of books, which form an encyclopædia of British UFOs from the 1940s to the present day. UFO researchers can arrange to visit his archives, and there is a YouTube video that tours his extensive UFO files at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=OLzTRPTgeOY

Isaac Koi collaborates with AFU and is constantly making UFO archives searchable and available online. One of his latest projects has been to download thousands of Australian UFO news clippings organised and assimilated using AI-generated code.

www.afu.se; nufohrc.org; Isaackoiup.blogspot.com; John Hanson's archive: www.facebook.com/groups/3272617712989097/

Is there anybody out there?

As NASA engages with UAPs, JENNY RANDLES thinks it's time to rethink the nature of alien visitors

As I noted last time, the past four years have seen some remarkable shifts in thinking about the concept of alien visitors to Earth that have fundamentally changed how we look at UFO encounters and their potential origin. Traditionally, we thought of UFOs as craft traversing the depths of space to pick up and probe some innocent Earthling, then fly home to some distant corner of the galaxy, perhaps to a hero's welcome. But just imagine *us* planning a mission to a planet orbiting a distant star where we think life might exist. Would we base our programme around some kind of quick medical probe that sent the subject away confused and traumatised and us not much the wiser about them? Considering a journey of many light years, you'd hope for mission planning that went beyond: "Tell these people you kidnap that you are from Mars – we might even make the local news."

The change in viewpoint has come from an unexpected quarter: not from UFO buffs, but from the military and space scientists. UAP – the new term for UFOs, used for years by the military – still refers to things unidentified and flying, but the emphasis is on aerial phenomena – which they clearly are, but not necessarily in the sense of being ET tech. After all, we know of a planet where such objects could originate: Earth.

Does the USA find these modest-sized objects coming from, say, China more or less concerning than if they came from a distant planet populated by alien entities? Either way, NASA has been given the task of figuring out what they are – which at least implies they have an open mind on these objects' origins.

Peter Warrington and I suggested researchers use the term 'UAP' instead of 'UFO' in the first book we wrote in the 1970s. We did so for the same reason NASA does today: UFO has become far too tied to the concept of 'little green men'. Calling them 'UAP' does not remove that possibility, but it does away with the 'must be alien' idea that we still infer from 'UFO'. Peter and I started from a different premise, as our 'A' stood for 'atmospheric' and we wanted it to be clear the explanation could be natural, which 'aerial' or 'anomalous' do too, but perhaps less clearly.

NASA's open-mindedness about some UAP actually being not of this Earth is probably down to a different reason. What if a cosmic probe entered our Solar System and was observed by our scientists, but its origin was never confirmed as it sailed on past with its potentially Earth-shattering secrets intact? Some scientists think this happened in recent years. The object's name was 'Oumuamua – Hawaiian for 'a messenger from afar arriving first'. It's a name that might have great meaning if it turns out that the space scientists are right about what this weird object just might be.

> The change in viewpoint has come from an unexpected quarter

Though the prevailing view remains that it was a very unusual asteroid-like rock, 'Oumuamua did have features that were hard to understand, including its long, thin shape, its speed and its path through the Solar System. Some prominent scientists suspected it had a more intriguing origin – that it could be a probe sent by an alien civilisation to 'investigate' the Sol system. Were alien scientists seeking at least one other planet that might harbour life?

As I said in my last article, we are in the early days of being able to map out solar systems around other stars. We know they exist in abundance, so some of them should be capable of sustaining life. We have sent out our own probes, with a 'welcome pack' of music and images from Earth, so if they one day pass through an inhabited system round another star, any aliens finding them would be in no doubt that others – *us* – were out there saying hello.

There are, though, problems: space is huge, our Voyager probes are tiny and, while travelling fast by our standards, are very slow in interstellar terms. The chance of discovery is incredibly remote, as it's going to be a very long time – countless thousands of years – before it even becomes a possibility. And there's no guarantee our craft will survive that long in working order.

Of course, if 'Oumuamua was such a device sent from another civilisation, it passed us by before we could discover its identity. And even if it was functioning after its journey from a distant star system, then it must have been launched a very, very long time ago. If it sent back information, it might have used technology that we do not have – but was there anyone left to hear of its discoveries? Much as if the dinosaurs had sent a probe to the stars, any response would not have come back to them for millions of years… only to be picked up by the wrong terrestrials!

We'll probably never know if 'Oumuamua was anything but a space rock, unless it has flagged our Solar System and sent a faster-than-light message to its origin world; or to a spaceship rather closer to Earth waiting to travel the final space miles and say hello. If anyone was advanced enough to send such probes, then years on in their development they could be a spacefaring race reacting to the findings of the remote probe they sent, long ago, toward a promising looking solar system such as ours.

These possibilities have intrigued the scientific community enough to make UFO investigation seem less absurd than it once did. As I noted recently, NASA is taking on the responsibility for evaluating evidence and even happily using the term UAP for the small objects (possibly surveillance devices) that have been flying at will within our atmosphere over the past 20 years and which were captured on our own advanced visual systems (see "Take Me to Your Leader", pp.40-43 this issue).

It is telling that whatever these UAP are ultimately concluded to be – advanced Earth-based technology, for example – the US space agency has been charged with the investigation. That suggests that the possibility they might not be of this world is being considered. There is a long way to go before we accept UAP as alien probes. You'd assume indisputable hard evidence of non-terrestrial construction must be obtained before other options are ruled out. For example, a secret test programme by rich entrepreneurs, as unlikely as that sounds, would need to be definitively eliminated before we announced that aliens were here.

If NASA were to make such a momentous announcement, then we would be reasonably confident it was founded on indisputable evidence. Against a backdrop of decades of alien invasion movies and stories about alien abductions, public reaction would have to be carefully managed.

What is undoubtedly true is that in 2023 the nature of UFO investigation has changed forever. We may look back on this time as the point when science finally took notice of evidence ufologists had put forward for years, even if, to be fair, it quite often was less than robust. Now with NASA on the case we may be on the brink of the final phase of UFO investigation: the endgame, one way or the other.

THE GHOST SCRAPBOOKS OF TOM PERROTT PART ONE

The 1970s were a golden age for ghost stories in British newspapers, says **ALAN MURDIE**, and thanks to the late Tom Perrott, who collected newsclippings from the local press, we can step back in time to this haunted decade.

That the times are out of joint is not a new complaint in human history. In recent years the notion of 'hauntology' and the attachment of eerie personal feelings to specific periods have come to focus upon the 1970s. Those who grew up during the decade recall it as unsettling, a time of indefinable disquiet and unease, leading it to be dubbed the 'haunted generation' (see Bob Fischer, "The Haunted Generation", **FT354:30-37**). *Fortean Times* – which itself first saw the light in the year 1973 – has charted the rise of these retrospective perceptions and symptoms, together with their role in inspiring a new artistic movement which both recalls and re-imagines the time.

LEFT: Tom Perrott with some of his 3,000 index cards relating to haunted locations in the UK.

WHAT IS REVEALED IS A TIME WHEN PEOPLE SPOKE DIRECTLY AND OPENLY ABOUT THEIR GHOST EXPERIENCES IN THE PRESS

Certainly when the decade is revisited through the prism of hindsight, it presents as a majorly different world compared with that of today (though not, I venture, one as far off and strange as 1920s society seemed looking back from the 1970s).

But as one of those whose memory stretches back to the 1970s, may I venture an alternative suggestion as to just why this era should be recalled as 'haunted'? Quite simply, because it was.

This is no false memory of my own derived from wistfully remembered television programmes, but rather from recollections of press and television coverage of hauntings at the time. Ghosts were national and local news throughout the 1970s, with an abundance of actual sightings that markedly contrast with the diminishing returns received from so many ghost hunting groups today.

family took
established
Mr Green.
constantly

mysterious movements,
often violent, of objects
about the house, were

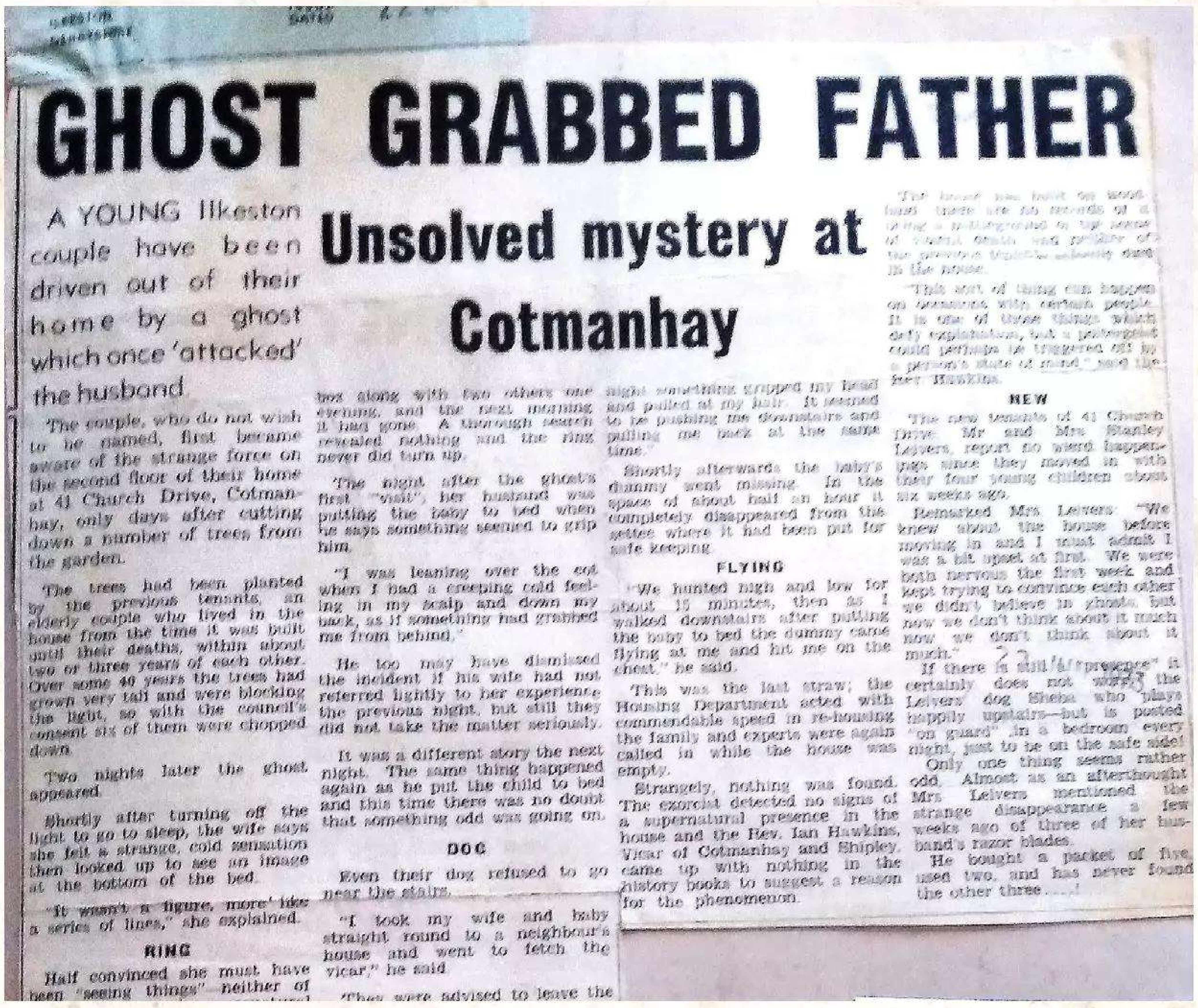
Research in
masses of data and
books.

If ever ready confirmation were needed of the 1970s being a prime period for ghost-seeing, we might turn to a series of scrapbooks and files compiled by Tom Perrott (1922-2013), an independent researcher and chairman of the Ghost Club between 1969 and 1998. Perrott was frequently the right-hand man of Peter Underwood, the Ghost Club President, who, thanks to a series of successful ghost books and a touch of self-aggrandisement, tended to be hailed as the leading British ghost hunter of the day. But it was the quiet research and dedication of Perrott in chronicling reports that really reveals just how haunted the 1970s actually were. Between 1969 and 1994, Perrott steadily built up a 3,000-entry card index on UK haunted places. In the manner of Charles Fort's harvesting of material from provincial papers, Perrott drew on the British equivalents of what Fort called "the *New York Something or Another*, or the *Tasmanian Whatever*". The most striking reports he put into scrapbooks, his most concentrated efforts, with the aid of press cutting agencies, spanning 1970-1979. And what a rich source the newspapers of the time prove to be! Local papers were vibrant publications exhaustively detailing the doings and minutiæ of the lives of residents on a daily or weekly basis. What is revealed is a time when people spoke directly and openly about their ghost experiences in the press and stories were gathered by local newsmen and women who headed immediately to visit the locations and interview the often puzzled or traumatised witnesses. Some of the best accounts made it to the regional or national press and a number were picked up by television, including the BBC's news and current affairs show *Nationwide*, broadcast on weeknights between 1969 and 1983.

A NATION OF GHOSTS

Both urban and rural settings were covered. Britain in the 1970s had a "countryside that teemed with ghosts and boggarts" (*Blackburn Times*, 13 Mar 1970) from Land's End to the tip of Scotland and the isles beyond. Over the decade, ghost reports ranged from a phantom pair of blue trousers stalking a shop in St Ives, Cornwall, all the way to a strange figure seen standing by beds at the John O'Groats Hotel at the tip of Scotland.[1] The northernmost islands were represented by Loch Swannay in the Orkneys, where in September 1971 a couple returning from a dance saw the misty figures of a man and a child moving slowly over the road down towards the loch, and by unexplained lights in the shell of the much haunted Windhouse on Yell in the Shetlands.[2] What was taken to be a Roman centurion

GHOSTS
1970 - 1972
DALE
PETER HARRIS
Pleas.
Farm
Ghosts
ROMEIKE AND CU
Liverpool Daily Po
LIVERPOOL 67-370
Daily Circulation 96,396
17 MAR 1970
Albert, the very picture of a ghost
in g
who just vanish
THIS story comes from Mrs. E. Preston, who lives now at Gordon House, Norman Road, Greenwich.
cardigan buttoned to the neck. She had on a brown skirt and thick lisle stockings. She had her hair drawn back from her face in a plaited bun at the back.
Sad



GHOST GRABBED FATHER

Unsolved mystery at Cotmanhay

A YOUNG Ilkeston couple have been driven out of their home by a ghost which once 'attacked' the husband

The couple, who do not wish to be named, first became aware of the strange force on the second floor of their home at 41 Church Drive, Cotmanhay, only days after cutting down a number of trees from the garden.

The trees had been planted by the previous tenants, an elderly couple who lived in the house from the time it was built until their deaths, within about two or three years of each other. Over some 40 years the trees had grown very tall and were blocking the light, so with the council's consent six of them were chopped down.

Two nights later the ghost appeared.

Shortly after turning off the light to go to sleep, the wife says she felt a strange, cold sensation then looked up to see an image at the bottom of the bed.

"It wasn't a figure, more like a series of lines," she explained.

RING

Half convinced she must have been "seeing things" neither of

box along with two others one evening, and the next morning it had gone. A thorough search revealed nothing and the ring never did turn up.

The night after the ghost's first "visit", her husband was putting the baby to bed when he says something seemed to grip him.

"I was leaning over the cot when I had a creeping cold feeling in my scalp and down my back, as if something had grabbed me from behind."

He too may have dismissed the incident if his wife had not referred lightly to her experience the previous night, but still they did not take the matter seriously.

It was a different story the next night. The same thing happened again as he put the child to bed and this time there was no doubt that something odd was going on.

DOG

Even their dog refused to go near the stairs.

"I took my wife and baby straight round to a neighbour's house and went to fetch the vicar," he said.

"They were advised to leave the

night something gripped my head and pulled at my hair. It seemed to be pushing me downstairs and pulling me back at the same time."

Shortly afterwards the baby's dummy went missing. In the space of about half an hour it completely disappeared from the settee where it had been put for safe keeping.

FLYING

"We hunted high and low for about 15 minutes, then as I walked downstairs after putting the baby to bed the dummy came flying at me and hit me on the chest," he said.

This was the last straw; the Housing Department acted with commendable speed in re-housing the family and experts were again called in while the house was empty.

Strangely, nothing was found. The exorcist detected no signs of a supernatural presence in the house and the Rev. Ian Hawkins, Vicar of Cotmanhay and Shipley, came up with nothing in the history books to suggest a reason for the phenomenon.

The house was built on wood-land: there are no records of it being a battleground or the scene of violent death, and neither of the previous [illegible] died in the house.

"This sort of thing can happen on occasions with certain people. It is one of those things which defy explanation, but a poltergeist could perhaps be triggered off by a person's state of mind," said the Rev. Hawkins.

NEW

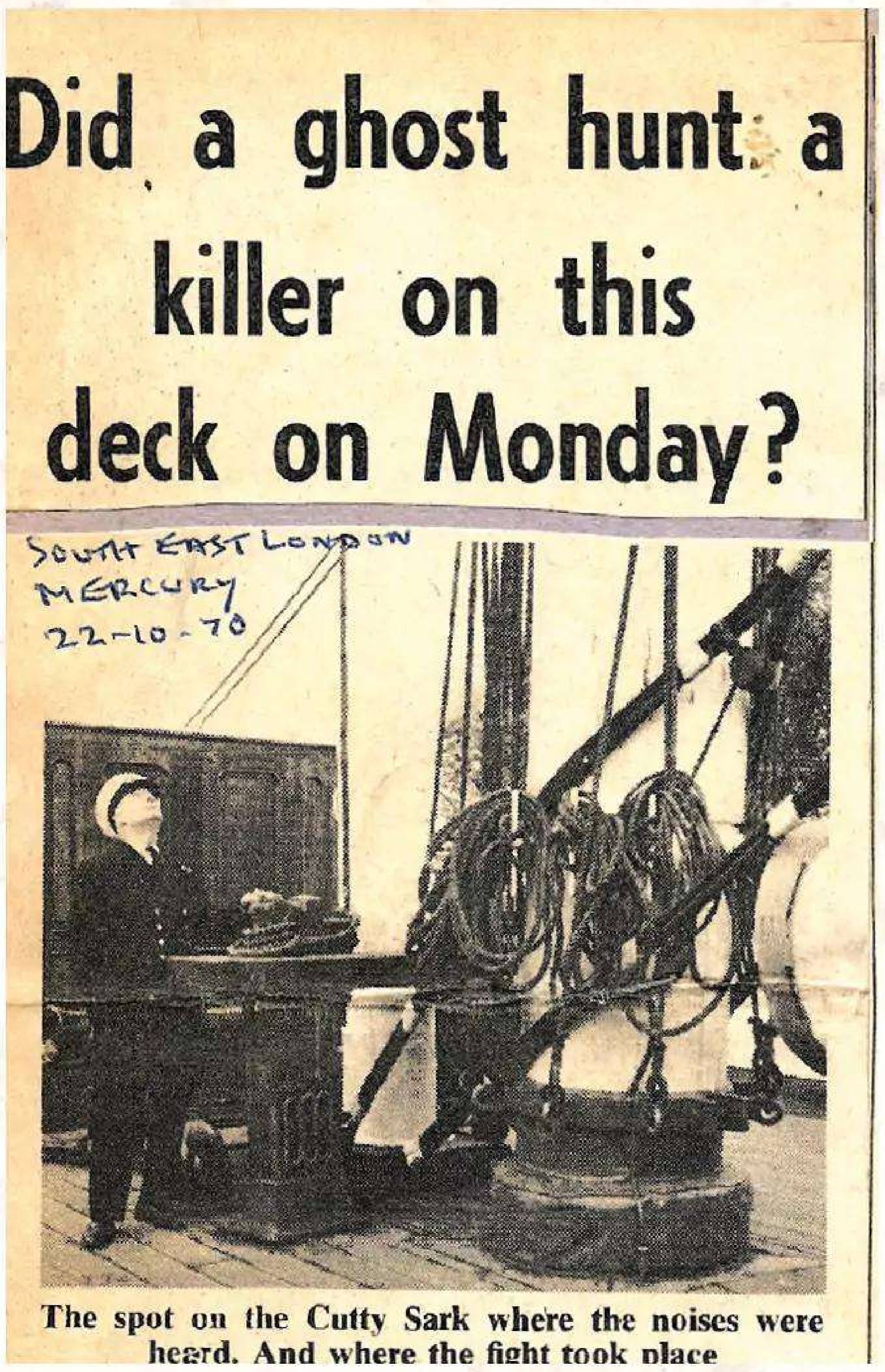
The new tenants of 41 Church Drive, Mr and Mrs Stanley Leivers, report no weird happenings since they moved in with their four young children about six weeks ago.

Remarked Mrs Leivers: "We knew about the house before moving in and I must admit I was a bit upset at first. We were both nervous the first week and kept trying to convince each other we didn't believe in ghosts, but now we don't think about it much now we don't think about it much."

If there is still a "presence" it certainly does not worry the Leivers' dog Sheba who plays happily upstairs—but is posted "on guard" in a bedroom every night, just to be on the safe side!

Only one thing seems rather odd. Almost as an afterthought Mrs Leivers mentioned the strange disappearance a few weeks ago of three of her husband's razor blades.

He bought a packet of five, used two, and has never found the other three.....!



Did a ghost hunt a killer on this deck on Monday?

South East London
Mercury
22-10-70

The spot on the Cutty Sark where the noises were heard. And where the fight took place

ABOVE LEFT: One of a number of cases in Tom Perrott's scrapbooks in which a violent poltergeist assaulted young families. **ABOVE RIGHT:** 1970 saw reports of a noisy haunting on board the *Cutty Sark* in Greenwich. **BELOW:** In the spring of 1970, dog trainer and television star Barbara Woodhouse was being bothered by a poltergeist.

glided out along the Strood, a causeway running to Mersea Island, Essex, in February 1970.[3] On the A5 between Dunstable and Markyate two taxi drivers saw a ghost in cricketing whites according to the *Luton News* (23 Apr 1970). A maxi-skirted ghost was seen preening itself in the mirror at the Queen's Head Salon, in Newark, terrifying hairdressers, and two phantom children materialised in the yard of a cottage at Oundle in Northamptonshire.[4]

Built up areas proved well haunted too. An eerie sighting came from Middlesbrough. A Miss Ward, 19, and her six-year-old niece saw what appeared to be a very wrinkled old lady, dressed in white from head to toe, who stood beckoning to them from the step of a house at 19 Cecil Street. The property had been boarded up for a year. Miss Ward saw it again the following night.[5]

Tom Perrott's scrapbooks reveal many ghosts that were close up and personal. An article in

A MONK WITH A TWISTED FACE HAD STARTLED THE OCCUPIER WHILE HE WAS SEATED ON THE TOILET IN AN OUTSIDE LAVATORY

Lancashire Evening Telegraph of 4 April 1970 warned people to "Watch out for the ghosts of Foulridge", citing how Hobstones Cottage was afflicted by a monk "with a gnarled and twisted face" who had startled the occupier (a man the paper called 'Mr X') while he was seated on the toilet in an outside lavatory. 'Mr X' was "so terrified as to be unable to speak or move" while the privacy-violating monk "stared into his eyes for several minutes". Afterwards, the hapless occupier of the haunted privy rationalised this as a practical joke played by a live local – until both he and his wife saw the monk hovering close up and vanishing when within three feet of them.[6] The wife became exceedingly nervous and, fearing for their children, they successfully applied for public housing.

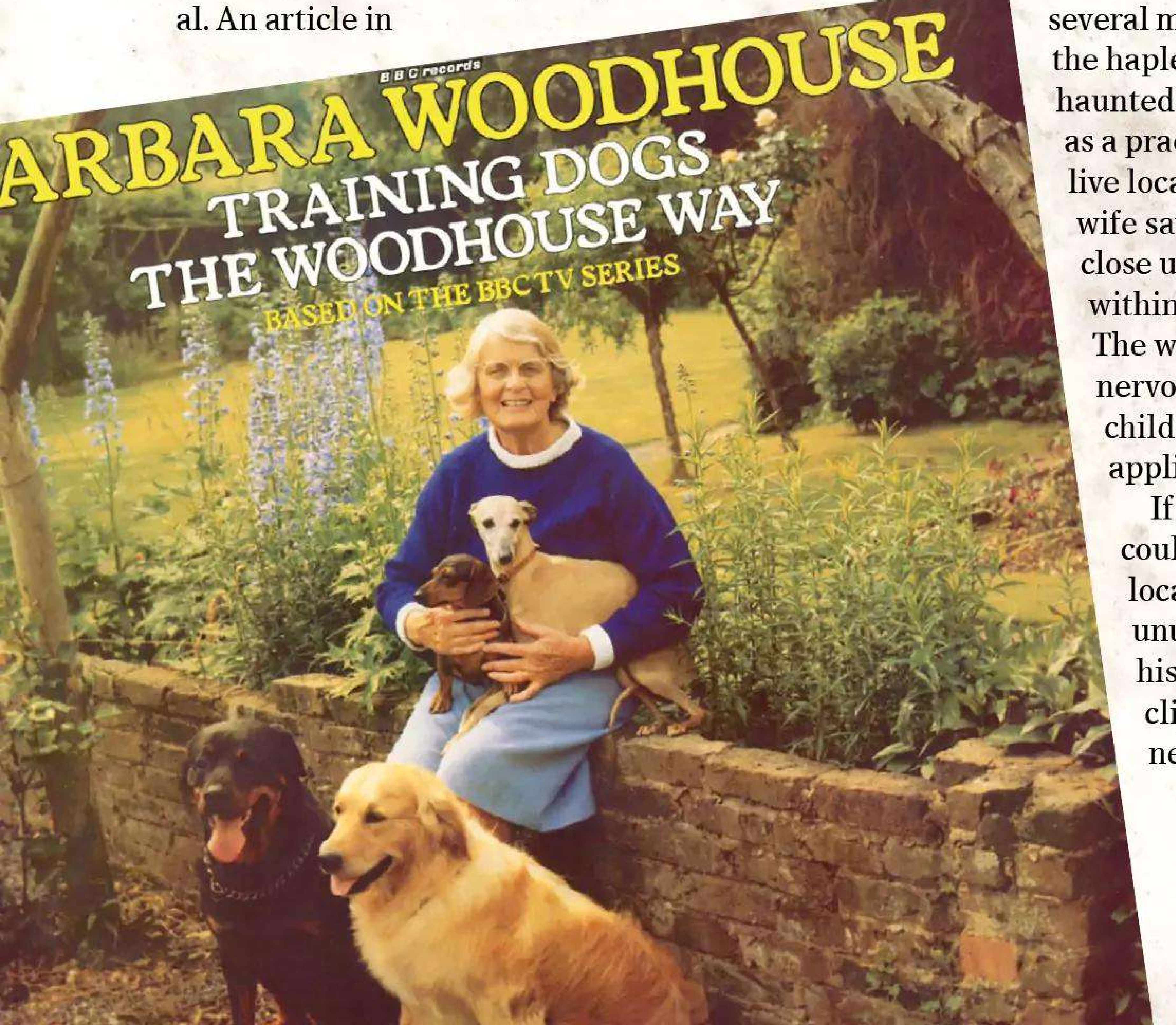
If not seen, ghosts could be heard at diverse locations. One of the most unusual was aboard the historic *Cutty Sark* tea clipper moored permanently at Greenwich. She was opened to the public by Queen Elizabeth in 1957, and the ghost of a man allegedly murdered on board many years earlier stalked the decks. Nightwatchman Sidney Smith, a 62-year-old former merchant seaman, told the *South East London Mercury* for 22 Oct 1970: "It was the queerest thing that ever happened to me. And I have been in some strange situations." Mr Smith heard "strange, baffling noises" such as bangs, footsteps and knocks. Convinced a burglar was aboard, he called the police, but their investigation found nothing. Later, the noises resumed.

His story was backed by Captain David Reid of the *Cutty Sark*, who said, "I've spent many a night on board myself and heard the banging. Sailors believe in ghosts and they don't bother me at all, but I do have trouble keeping night watchmen."

Over 30 years later, in 2008, the *Cutty Sark* suffered a devastating fire, followed by a second smaller blaze in 2014. These may have laid the ghosts, though more recent 21st century tales claim a phantom sailor appears on the rigging, scanning the horizon, allegedly a mariner who died onboard when the vessel was caught in a storm off Cape Horn.[7]

A PLAGUE OF POLTS

Poltergeists plagued homes throughout the 1970s, predominantly afflicting working class households, but also showing up in middle class settings. In May 1970, dog trainer Barbara Woodhouse reported one at her home in Croxley Green near Watford. "This one is horrid. I sometimes get so angry at our poltergeist I want to scream. But getting angry is the worst thing you can do because the wretched thing simply plays up more to annoy you." Its antics included removing



things of "immense importance" for days, which she found "most infuriating".

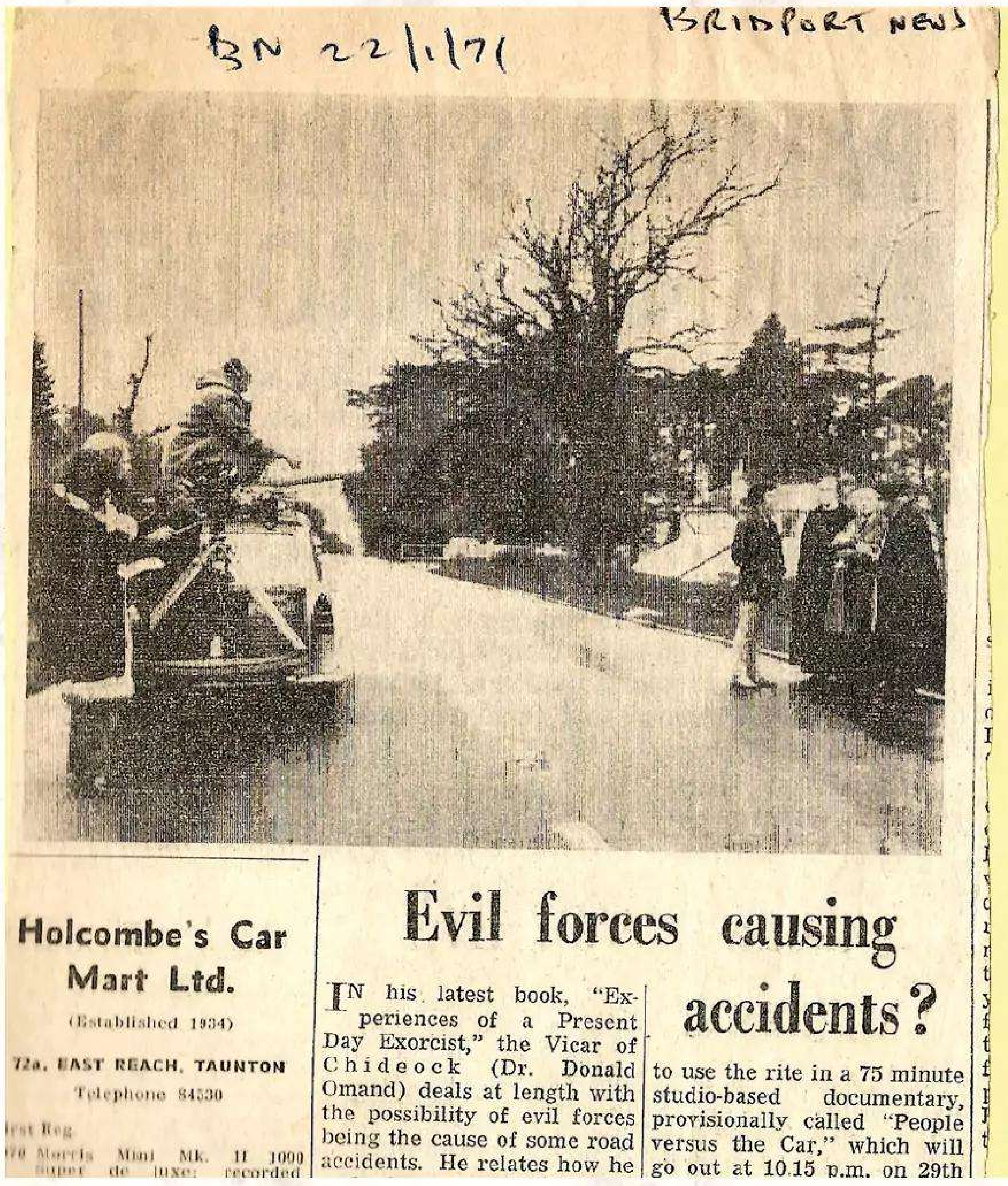
A decade later, in the 1980s, the same Barbara Woodhouse achieved stardom upon being given her own BBC 2 TV series, *Training Dogs the Woodhouse Way*. Those recalling her rather brusque and waspish manner may ponder whether the poltergeist was an aspect of her own personality. (*Evening Echo* Watford, 26 May 1970).

Other poltergeists could be violent and dangerous. In November 1971, Mr William Paston-Bedingfield of Sunderland claimed he was engaged in writing a ghost story when he was attacked. He was standing at the top of the stairs when: "Something came behind me – just a force – and propelled me down the stairs and through the glass door. It was completely shattered and I was cut." [8] "Ghost Grabbed Father" announced the *Ilkeston Advertiser* of 22 June 1973, referring to a typical case illustrating how both parents and children in young families were targeted and often manhandled by poltergeists. Just over a year later, the activity erupted in Nottingham where Colin Smith, 22, his wife Pauline and their young son Glenn were so persecuted by poltergeist tricks that they spent only five months in two and half years at their home in a privately rented house in Glapton Road in the Meadows district (*Nottingham Post*, 20 July 1974). Vases and ashtrays crashed to the floor, curtains flew in the air and doors slammed without explanation. After hearing scratching noises Colin said they put up a cross of wood. When Pauline later removed it, "a black veil followed her across the room, then flew at me," he said. Colin lost 10 jobs in two years because of bad timekeeping caused by sleepless nights. Pauline believed the entity was demonic.

Apparitions sometimes accompanied disturbances: for instance, three black figures resembling priests stalked a flat at Barton House, Bow High Street, with the family turning to the press for assistance. ("Family Plagued by a poltergeist plead for our help", *East London Advertiser*, 24 May 1975).

Occasionally, sketches and paintings were offered of entities' haunting presences. Beverley Dennis, eight, drew pictures of 'Albert the Ghost' – "a plump elderly man with a walking stick" who shared her family home at Dufton Road, Quinton, Birmingham. 'Albert' was blamed for banging noises, moving ornaments and calling out the names of family members.[9] Mrs Pauline Coates, 34, told the *Palmers Green and Southgate Gazette* (4 April 1974) how she had been pursued by a ghost for nine years after moving into a house in Enfield. She gave a vivid description of the 6-ft 3-in (190cm) hooded figure.

Outdoors, roads in some areas were considered so hazardous that an exorcism might be in order. "Evil forces causing accidents" was a headline in the *Bridport News* of 22 January 1971, referring to an exorcism conducted by the Revd. Donald Omand, vicar of Chideock, Somerset, along a stretch of the A35 at Ballair between Morecombelake and Charmouth. The segment of road had been the scene of many serious, sometimes fatal accidents, "most of which have been difficult to explain". The exorcism was filmed by a BBC unit for a programme called *People versus the Car* transmitted on 29 May 1971. Omand was featured, explaining that he believed psychic forces were causing drivers to lose control and creating accident blackspots. He was filmed with other clergymen preparing for the special rite he conducted at St Giles's Church, Chideock. Two years later, Omand went on to challenge the Loch Ness Monster, and near the end of the decade also tackled the menace of the Bermuda Triangle, behind which, he claimed, lay dark spiritual forces.



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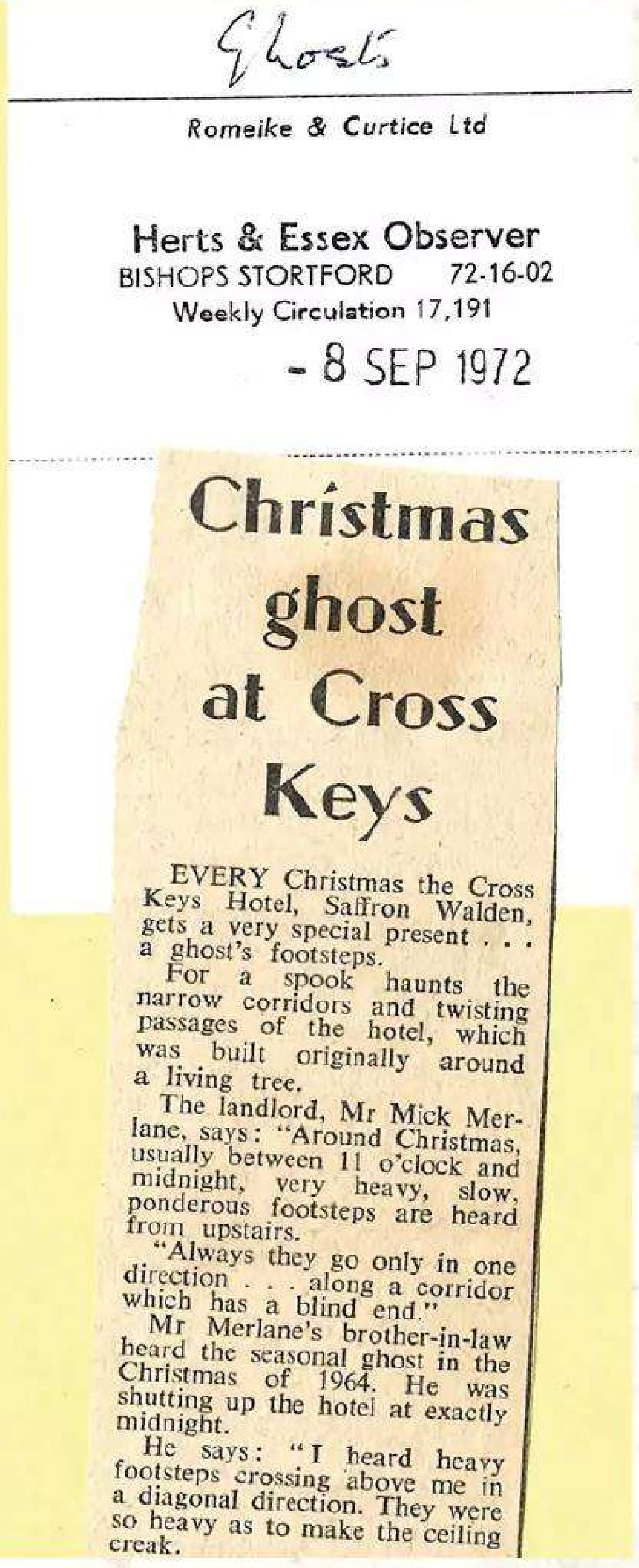
Evil forces causing accidents?

IN his latest book, "Experiences of a Present Day Exorcist," the Vicar of Chideock (Dr. Donald Omand) deals at length with the possibility of evil forces being the cause of some road accidents. He relates how he

to use the rite in a 75 minute studio-based documentary, provisionally called "People versus the Car," which will go out at 10.15 p.m. on 29th



Ghosts

Romeike & Curtice Ltd

Herts & Essex Observer
BISHOPS STORTFORD 72-16-02
Weekly Circulation 17,191

- 8 SEP 1972

Christmas ghost at Cross Keys

EVERY Christmas the Cross Keys Hotel, Saffron Walden, gets a very special present . . . a ghost's footsteps.

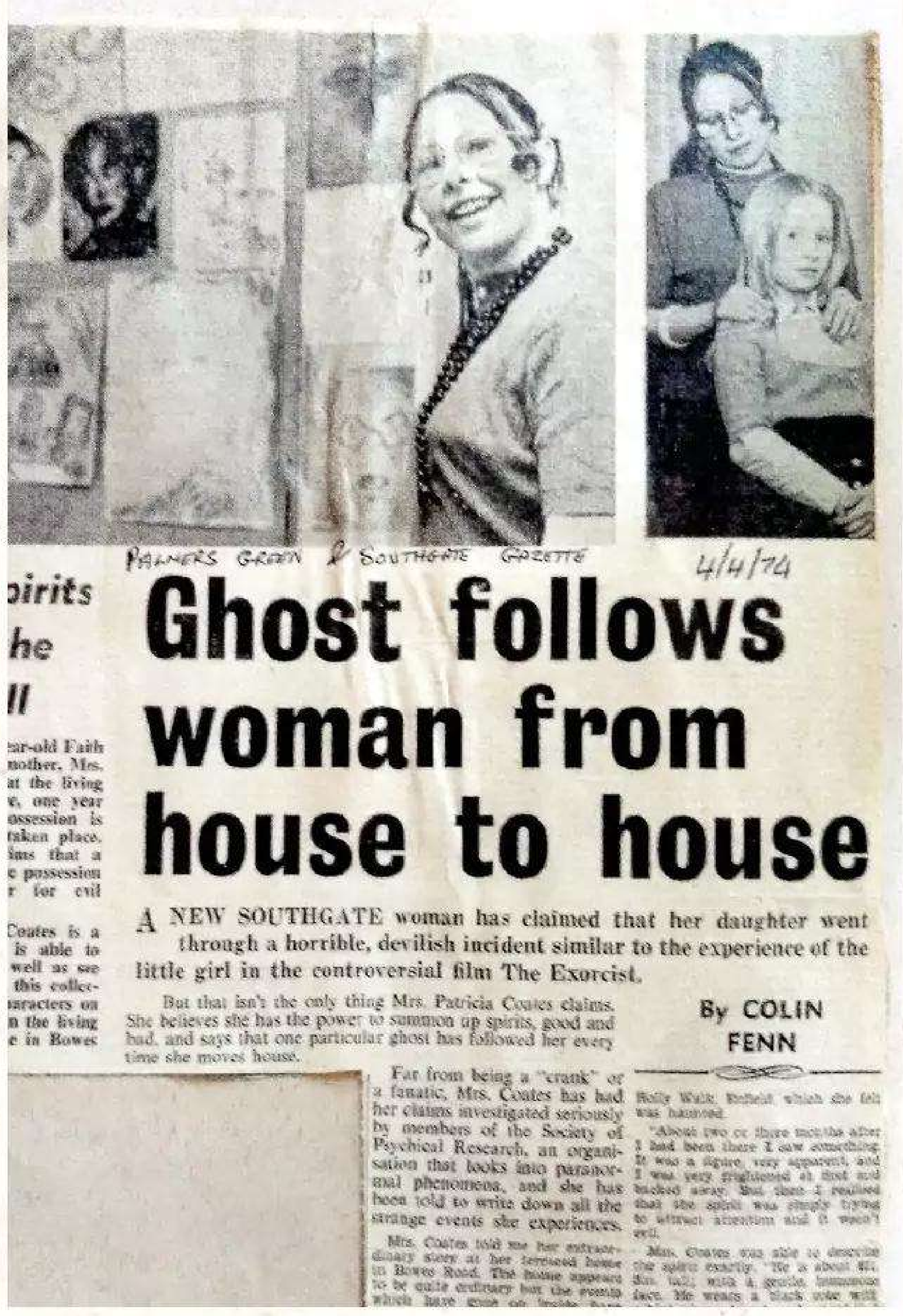
For a spook haunts the narrow corridors and twisting passages of the hotel, which was built originally around a living tree.

The landlord, Mr Mick Merlane, says: "Around Christmas, usually between 11 o'clock and midnight, very heavy, slow, ponderous footsteps are heard from upstairs.

"Always they go only in one direction . . . along a corridor which has a blind end."

Mr Merlane's brother-in-law heard the seasonal ghost in the Christmas of 1964. He was shutting up the hotel at exactly midnight.

He says: "I heard heavy footsteps crossing above me in a diagonal direction. They were so heavy as to make the ceiling creak.



PALMERS GREEN & SOUTHGATE GAZETTE 4/4/74

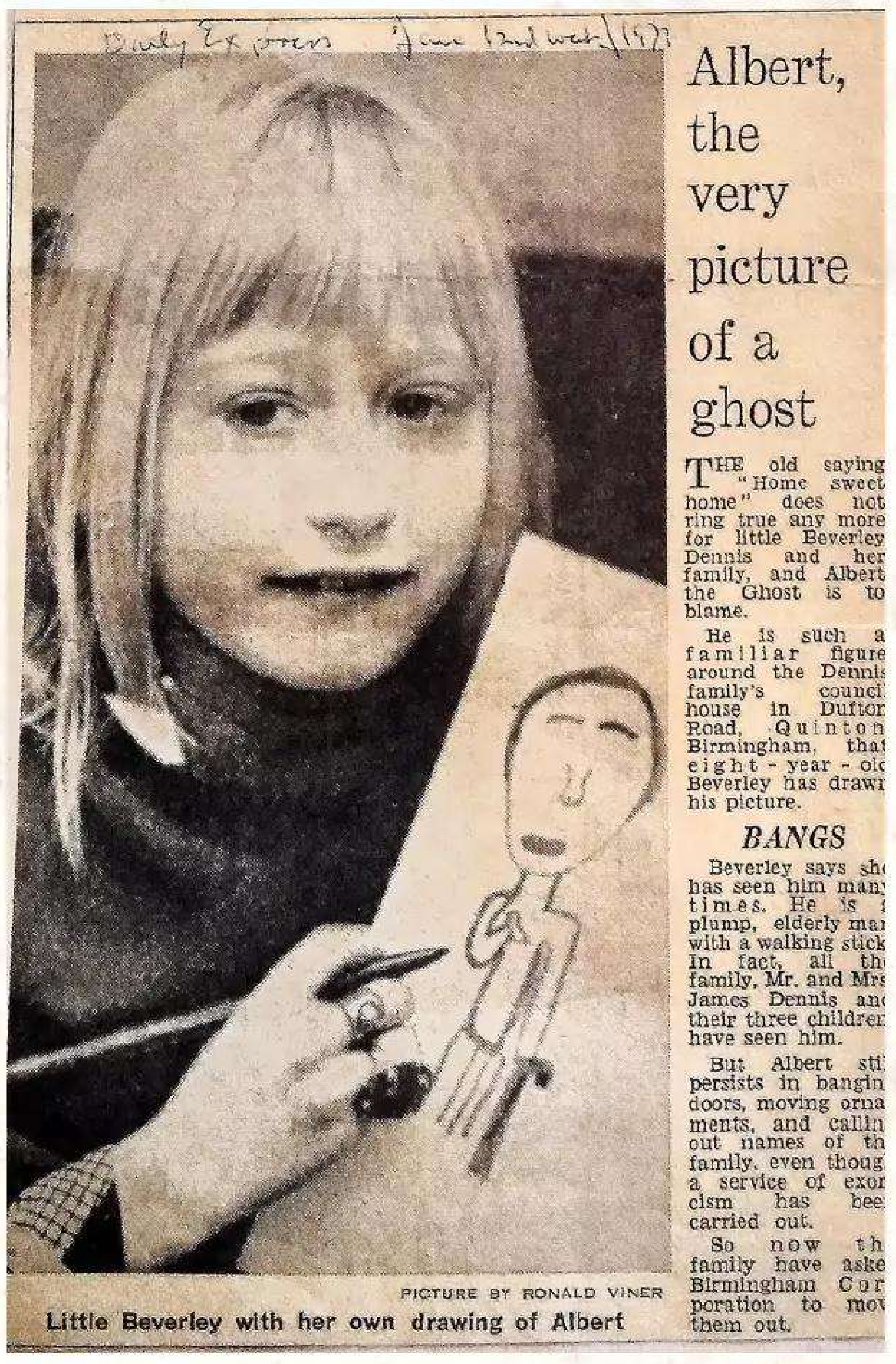
Ghost follows woman from house to house

A NEW SOUTHGATE woman has claimed that her daughter went through a horrible, devilish incident similar to the experience of the little girl in the controversial film The Exorcist.

But that isn't the only thing Mrs. Patricia Coates claims. She believes she has the power to summon up spirits, good and bad, and says that one particular ghost has followed her every time she moves house.

By COLIN FENN

Far from being a "crank" or a fanatic, Mrs. Coates has had her claims investigated seriously by members of the Society of Psychical Research, an organisation that looks into paranormal phenomena, and she has been told to write down all the strange events she experiences.



Daily Express June (2nd week) 1971

Albert, the very picture of a ghost

THE old saying "Home sweet home" does not ring true any more for little Beverley Dennis and her family, and Albert the Ghost is to blame.

He is such a familiar figure around the Dennis family's council house in Dufton Road, Quinton, Birmingham, that eight-year-old Beverley has drawn his picture.

BANGS

Beverley says she has seen him many times. He is a plump, elderly man with a walking stick. In fact, all the family, Mr. and Mrs James Dennis and their three children have seen him.

But Albert still persists in banging doors, moving ornaments, and calling out names of the family, even though a service of exorcism has been carried out.

So now the family have asked Birmingham Corporation to move them out.

PICTURE BY RONALD VINER

Little Beverley with her own drawing of Albert

TOP: Reverend Donald Omand exorcises a stretch of the A35 in Somerset in 1971. On the same page of the scrapbook is a clipping about a haunting at Saffron Walden's Cross Keys Hotel. **ABOVE LEFT**: In 1974, Pauline Coates of Enfield told reporters that a tall, hooded ghost had pursued her for nine years. **ABOVE RIGHT**: Beverley Dennis and her drawing of 'Albert the Ghost' who shared her Birmingham home in 1971.

Another clergyman, the Revd. John Griffin of Suffolk, attributed poltergeists to thought forms created by "lust and avarice" and considered that Aladdin's Genie, the Slave of the Lamp, was actually a poltergeist.[10]

OUIJA SCHOOL

During the early 1970s, school students and young people enjoyed a remarkable liberty in going out hunting ghosts, as a number of stories reveal – for example, "Boy Ghost Hunters Probing Weird Happenings At Church".[11] That this was deemed preferable to holding séances at home was made clear – a kind of psychic reverse of the 'it keeps them off the streets' argument – for woe betide any

ABOVE LEFT: The Arnold School in Blackpool, the scene of a Ouija board panic in March 1970. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Dom Robert Petitpierre warned of the dangers of using Ouija boards and wrote a book on exorcisms. **BELOW:** A *Liverpool Daily Post* report on the séances at the Arnold School.

child who dabbled with Ouija boards!

Of all these stories, the one on which Perrott collected more cuttings than any other came from the widespread coverage in March 1970 of a Ouija board-inspired panic affecting a fee-paying school in Blackpool. Some boys from Arnold School aged between 14 and 18 had formed an ‘Occult Society’ and were given permission by the headmaster, Mr OC Wigmore, to stay up from midnight to dawn in a cellar in the headmaster’s house and in an old classroom.

The chairman of the group, Peter Roscow, 16, described how he and eight other boys commenced Ouija board sessions. Their board spelt out a message from the spirit of a murdered woman who said she had been killed with an axe in 1854 by a man named Mercer. “We asked her why she was haunting the school and she said: ‘For revenge’.

‘We asked her to make her presence felt, and the room went icy cold, though we were practically opposite the boiler room.”

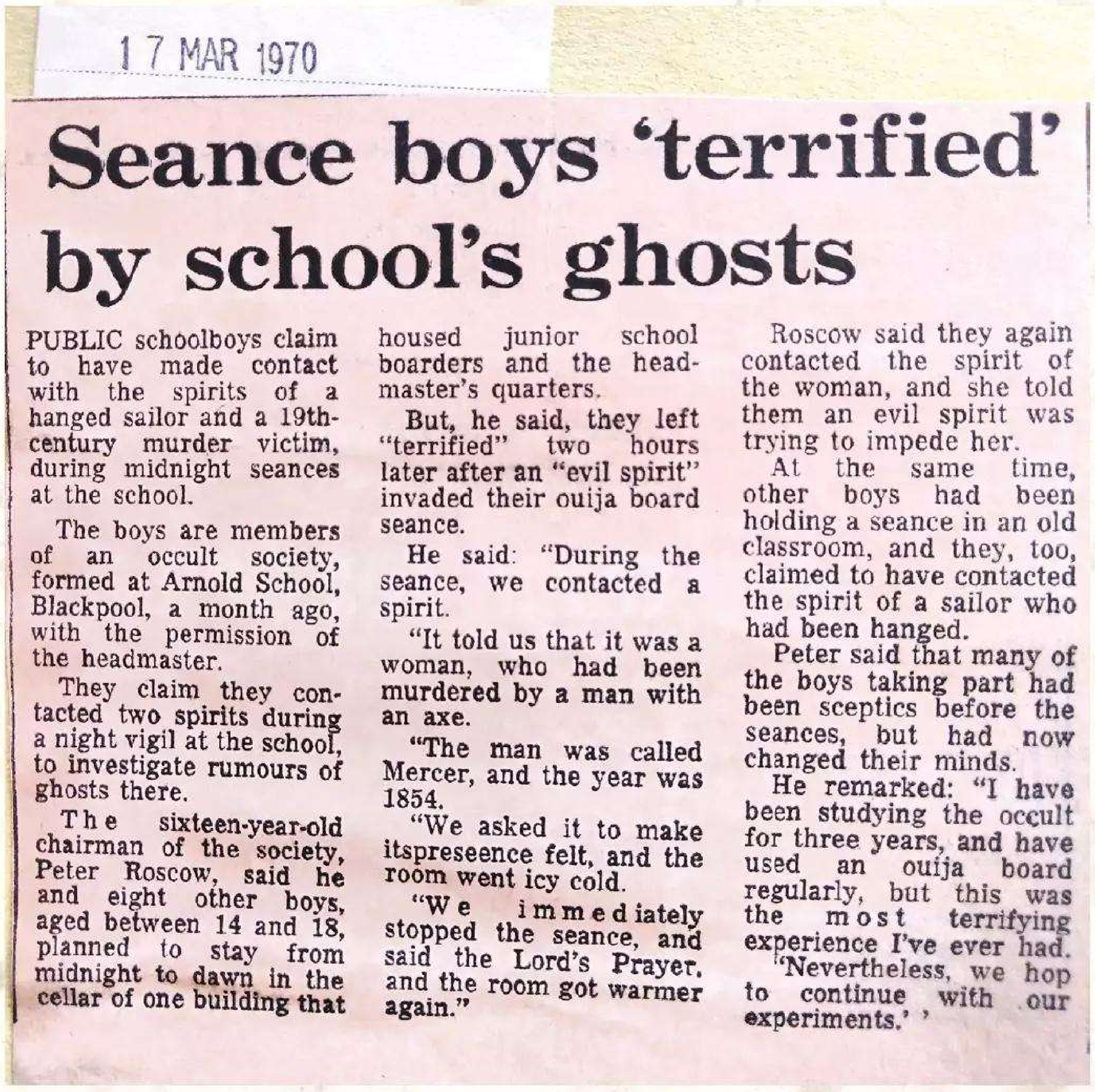
Thoroughly unnerved, the boys ceased their séance immediately and began reciting the Lord’s Prayer for protection, whereupon the temperature at once began getting warmer.

“I have been studying the occult for three years and this is the most terrifying experience I have ever had,” said young Peter Roscow.

Meanwhile, in another part of the school, a second group of boys believed they had contacted the ghost of a hanged sailor.

A school legend held that two former occupants of the headmaster’s house were executed for mass murder, but the boys were unaware of this at the time according to Roscow.

This story of terrified public school boys caused a sensation, reaching *The Times*, *Daily Telegraph,* the *Sun* and a host of regional papers on 17 March 1970, prompting warnings from Canon Pearce Higgins, who announced he was issuing a pamphlet “warning children, teachers, students and clergymen of the dangers of using the Ouija board”. He told the press, “I have never known a responsible medium who has not deplored the use of this method by immature persons because of the danger involved… The dangers are very considerable.”



17 MAR 1970

Seance boys ‘terrified’ by school’s ghosts

PUBLIC schoolboys claim to have made contact with the spirits of a hanged sailor and a 19th-century murder victim, during midnight seances at the school.

The boys are members of an occult society, formed at Arnold School, Blackpool, a month ago, with the permission of the headmaster.

They claim they contacted two spirits during a night vigil at the school, to investigate rumours of ghosts there.

The sixteen-year-old chairman of the society, Peter Roscow, said he and eight other boys, aged between 14 and 18, planned to stay from midnight to dawn in the cellar of one building that housed junior school boarders and the headmaster’s quarters.

But, he said, they left “terrified” two hours later after an “evil spirit” invaded their ouija board seance.

He said: “During the seance, we contacted a spirit.

“It told us that it was a woman, who had been murdered by a man with an axe.

“The man was called Mercer, and the year was 1854.

“We asked it to make itspreseence felt, and the room went icy cold.

“We immediately stopped the seance, and said the Lord’s Prayer, and the room got warmer again.”

Roscow said they again contacted the spirit of the woman, and she told them an evil spirit was trying to impede her.

At the same time, other boys had been holding a seance in an old classroom, and they, too, claimed to have contacted the spirit of a sailor who had been hanged.

Peter said that many of the boys taking part had been sceptics before the seances, but had now changed their minds.

He remarked: “I have been studying the occult for three years, and have used an ouija board regularly, but this was the most terrifying experience I’ve ever had.

‘Nevertheless, we hop to continue with our experiments.’ ’

THEIR OUIJA BOARD SPELT OUT A MESSAGE FROM THE SPIRIT OF A MURDERED WOMAN WHO SAID SHE HAD BEEN KILLED WITH AN AXE

It was a sentiment echoed by Dom Robert Petitpierre, who later wrote his own book on exorcisms, whose own theory was that ‘little devils’ were warps in the spiritual space-time continuum.

Yet conducting an exorcism with teenagers could sometimes do more harm than good. In one case in Essex, a 14-year-old boy was the agent or focus of poltergeist activity. The phenomena increased in intensity, as a result of the attention paid to the occurrences, and the youngster became more unmanageable. In desperation the parents took the boy, accompanied by an uncle and another relative, to the local church where a special service was arranged by the vicar. So intense was the atmosphere of hysteria that the vicar collapsed at the altar and the boy “went berserk”. Breaking free from his guardians, he ran back to his school where he attempted to set it alight. Both the boy and the priest had to undergo considerable psychiatric treatment afterwards. The boy was assessed as having enjoyed being the centre of attention and being strongly antagonistic towards the Church or anything else that might have restricted his performances or deprived him of the attention being paid to him. The phenomena eventually ceased and the youngster later became employed in an engineering firm.[12] These Ouija warnings were repeated over 1971-72, with the *Cambridge Evening News* of 11 November 1972 declaring it had been a "bumper year for ghosts".

DOWN ON THE FARM

Games with a Ouija board were blamed for one of the eeriest hauntings of the year at an isolated Yorkshire farmhouse. It was home to two middle-aged bachelor brothers, Jim and John Stothard, whose family had lived there since 1935. They bluntly stated, "Strange things are happening all right," and were convinced an "unknown force" was at work.

John Stothard said: "I have felt it pressing hard against my body. Sometimes it feels hot and sometimes it is icy cold. On one occasion it felt as if something was trying to pull an invisible shroud over me. On occasions I have felt a heavy weight across my legs." He added: "It is frightening. You can feel the presence of something in the room. Sometimes it gives off a peculiar smell."

One night, he woke up to find a pillow being forced over his head: "I got into a cold sweat." The entity was also giving Jim restless nights.

From an accompanying photograph, the Stothard brothers would appear to be the sort of no-nonsense Yorkshire sons of the soil whose attitudes are shaped by hard agricultural labour in all weathers. These were men who believed in plain dealings, adapted to the seasonal rhythms of the farming cycle and were patently not given to flights of imagination or superstition.

Pictured together standing behind a waist-high white picket fence or gate, the hardened face of the elder brother Jim contrasts with the softer expression of John, which carries hints of a smile and suggests a more mercurial and sensitive disposition revealed to the photographer.

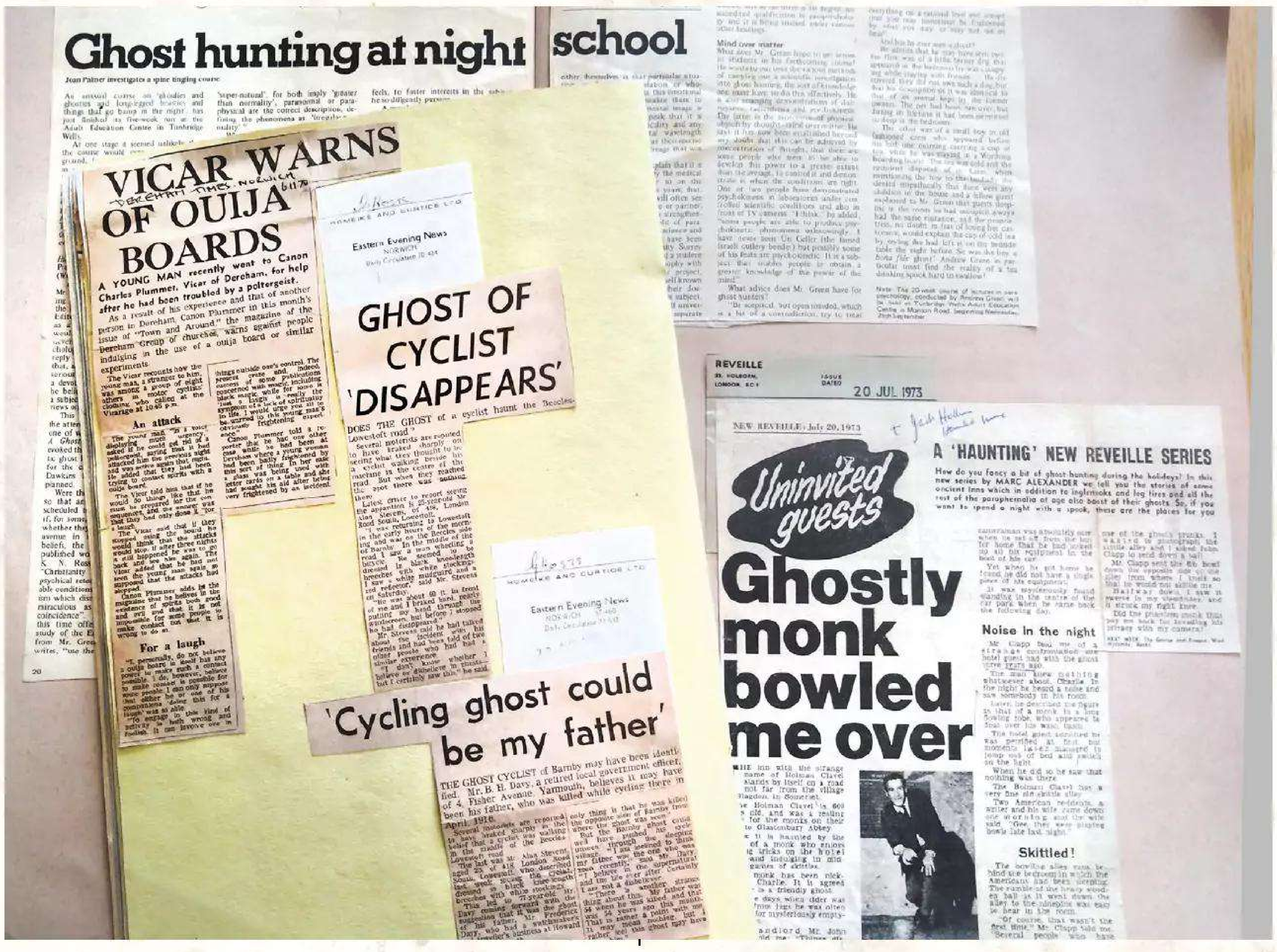
Their problems had begun two years before when they had a feeling that "something was in the house" at Mount Pleasant Farm at Lockton, near Pickering, Yorkshire. They dismissed this impression and the feeling evaporated. Then, three months before the interview – dating the commencement of manifestations to mid-September 1972 – they were "startled" and "shaken" by strange incidents resembling a poltergeist infestation, striking both inside and outside the farmhouse.

What they considered the first incident was the ripping up of fence posts, when three sections of inch-thick fencing, each three feet long, disappeared. This might have been the work of vandals, although the ground was muddy around it but showed no sign of footprints.

Then, on 14 September, the missing fencing re-appeared, deposited in a field where Jim Stothard found the posts laid out in the form of a Roman numeral VI. He stated: "I felt a queer sensation come over me and I am certain that I brought the thing into the house on that day." John experienced an invisible presence touching him in bed that same night. Initially, he tried to dismiss it all, but the feeling intensified and, becoming apprehensive, he sought sanctuary in his brother's bedroom.

From then on, many restless nights followed. Objects were thrown about, even though the door of the room was locked. Downstairs rooms were ransacked during the day, "although this could have been the work of thieves". The result was they started sleeping with a dim light burning all night, convinced a bellicose entity was present on the farm.

Peter Harris, a journalist from *The Mercury* (Scarborough), joined them for a night at the farmhouse, "surrounded by pagan burial mounds", to wait for the ghost in an upstairs room. It must have been an eerie experience. The year 1972 might have been the year the last astronaut walked on the Moon, the Watergate scandal broke and the UK



Ghost hunting at night school

VICAR WARNS OF OUIJA BOARDS

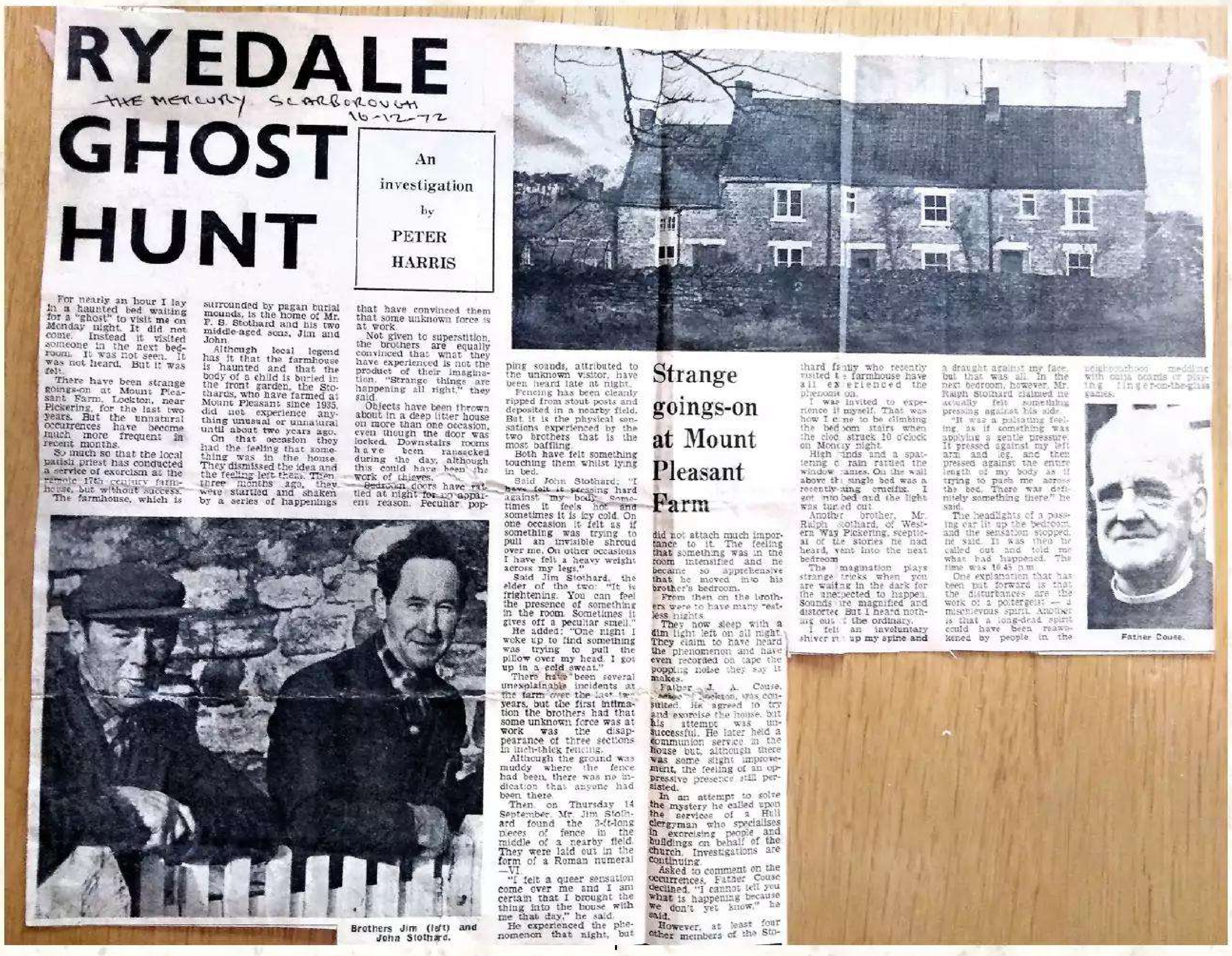
GHOST OF CYCLIST 'DISAPPEARS'

'Cycling ghost could be my father'

A 'HAUNTING' NEW REVEILLE SERIES

Uninvited guests

Ghostly monk bowled me over



RYEDALE GHOST HUNT

The Mercury Scarborough 16-12-72

An investigation by PETER HARRIS

For nearly an hour I lay in a haunted bed waiting for a "ghost" to visit me on Monday night. It did not come. Instead it visited someone in the next bedroom. It was not seen. It was not heard. But it was felt.

There have been strange goings-on at Mount Pleasant Farm, Lockton, near Pickering, for the last two years. But the unnatural occurrences have become much more frequent in recent months.

So much so that the local parish priest has conducted a service of exorcism at the remote 17th century farmhouse, but without success.

The farmhouse, which is surrounded by pagan burial mounds, is the home of Mr. F. S. Stothard and his two middle-aged sons, Jim and John.

Although local legend has it that the farmhouse is haunted and that the body of a child is buried in the front garden, the Stothards, who have farmed at Mount Pleasant since 1935, did not experience anything unusual or unnatural until about two years ago.

On that occasion they had the feeling that something was in the house. They dismissed the idea and the feeling left them. Then three months ago, they were startled and shaken by a series of happenings that have convinced them that some unknown force is at work.

Not given to superstition, the brothers are equally convinced that what they have experienced is not the product of their imagination. "Strange things are happening all right," they said.

Objects have been thrown about in a deep litter house on more than one occasion, even though the door was locked. Downstairs rooms have been ransacked during the day, although this could have been the work of thieves.

Bedroom doors have rattled at night for no apparent reason. Peculiar popping sounds, attributed to the unknown visitor, have been heard late at night.

Fencing has been cleanly ripped from stout posts and deposited in a nearby field. But it is the physical sensations experienced by the two brothers that is the most baffling.

Both have felt something touching them whilst lying in bed.

Said John Stothard: "I have felt it pressing hard against my body. Sometimes it feels hot and sometimes it is icy cold. On one occasion it felt as if something was trying to pull an invisible shroud over me. On other occasions I have felt a heavy weight across my legs."

Said Jim Stothard, the elder of the two: "It is frightening. You can feel the presence of something in the room. Sometimes it gives off a peculiar smell."

He added: "One night I woke up to find something was trying to pull the pillow over my head. I got up in a cold sweat."

There have been several unexplainable incidents at the farm over the last two years, but the first intimation the brothers had that some unknown force was at work was the disappearance of three sections in inch-thick fencing.

Although the ground was muddy where the fence had been, there was no indication that anyone had been there.

Then on Thursday 14 September, Mr. Jim Stothard found the 3-ft-long pieces of fence in the middle of a nearby field. They were laid out in the form of a Roman numeral —VI.

"I felt a queer sensation come over me and I am certain that I brought the thing into the house with me that day," he said.

He experienced the phenomenon that night, but

Brothers Jim (left) and John Stothard.

Strange goings-on at Mount Pleasant Farm

did not attach much importance to it. The feeling that something was in the room intensified and he became so apprehensive that he moved into his brother's bedroom.

From then on the brothers were to have many restless nights.

They now sleep with a dim light left on all night. They claim to have heard the phenomenon and have even recorded on tape the popping noise they say it makes.

Father J. A. Couse, [illegible] of Lockton, was consulted. He agreed to try and exorcise the house, but his attempt was unsuccessful. He later held a communion service in the house but, although there was some slight improvement, the feeling of an oppressive presence still persisted.

In an attempt to solve the mystery he called upon the services of a Hull clergyman who specialises in exorcising people and buildings on behalf of the church. Investigations are continuing.

Asked to comment on the occurrences, Father Couse declined. "I cannot tell you what is happening because we don't yet know," he said.

However, at least four other members of the Stothard family who recently visited the farmhouse have all experienced the phenomenon.

I was invited to experience it myself. That was how I came to be climbing the bedroom stairs when the clock struck 10 o'clock on Monday night.

High winds and a spattering of rain rattled the window panes. On the wall above the single bed was a recently-hung crucifix. I got into bed and the light was turned out.

Another brother, Mr. Ralph Stothard, of Western Way Pickering, sceptical of the stories he had heard, went into the next bedroom.

The imagination plays strange tricks when you are waiting in the dark for the unexpected to happen. Sounds are magnified and distorted. But I heard nothing out of the ordinary.

I felt an involuntary shiver run up my spine and a draught against my face, but that was all. In the next bedroom, however, Mr. Ralph Stothard claimed he actually felt something pressing against his side.

"It was a pulsating feeling, as if something was applying a gentle pressure. It pressed against my left arm and leg, and then pressed against the entire length of my body as if trying to push me across the bed. There was definitely something there," he said.

The headlights of a passing car lit up the bedroom and the sensation stopped, he said. It was then he called out and told me what had happened. The time was 10.45 p.m.

One explanation that has been put forward is that the disturbances are the work of a poltergeist — a mischievous spirit. Another is that a long-dead spirit could have been reawakened by people in the neighbourhood meddling with ouija boards or playing finger-on-the-glass games.

Father Couse.

TOP: Pages from Tom Perrott's scrapbooks, including coverage of a Dereham vicar taking on a poltergeist, Andrew Green's parapsychology course in Tunbridge, a ghostly monk in a bowling alley and the cycling ghost of Barnby. **ABOVE:** The *Scarborough Mercury* pubished a lengthy report on the "strange goings-on" at Mount Pleasant Farm in 1972, with reporter Peter Harris even spending the night in the haunted farmhouse.

agreed its entry to the Common Market, but places like Lockton in Yorkshire still seemed curiously remote. Describing his ghost hunt on the night of 11 December 1972, Harris wrote: “For nearly an hour I lay in a haunted bed waiting for a ‘ghost’ to visit me on Monday night. It did not come. Instead it visited someone in the next bedroom. It was not seen. It was not heard.But it was felt.” [13] One theory was that people in the district might have been using a Ouija board and had summoned something. Jim Stothard was quoted as saying: “If this is the cause then I wish they would stop it. We might get some peace in the future.” The simple, heartfelt expression conveys a conviction disposing of the notion of a deliberate stunt or hoax.

If this had happened earlier in the 20th century, people might have muttered about witchcraft; in the Balkans, it would have been vampirism.

Ghost hunter Peter Underwood later claimed credit for quelling the manifestations when he wrote his autobiography *No Common Task* (1983). “In an effort to bring peace to the troubled occupants, I devised a formula and procedure based upon sympathetic magic and the power of the number three, involving a magical incantation.” It was one of the few cases in his career where he resorted to such techniques.

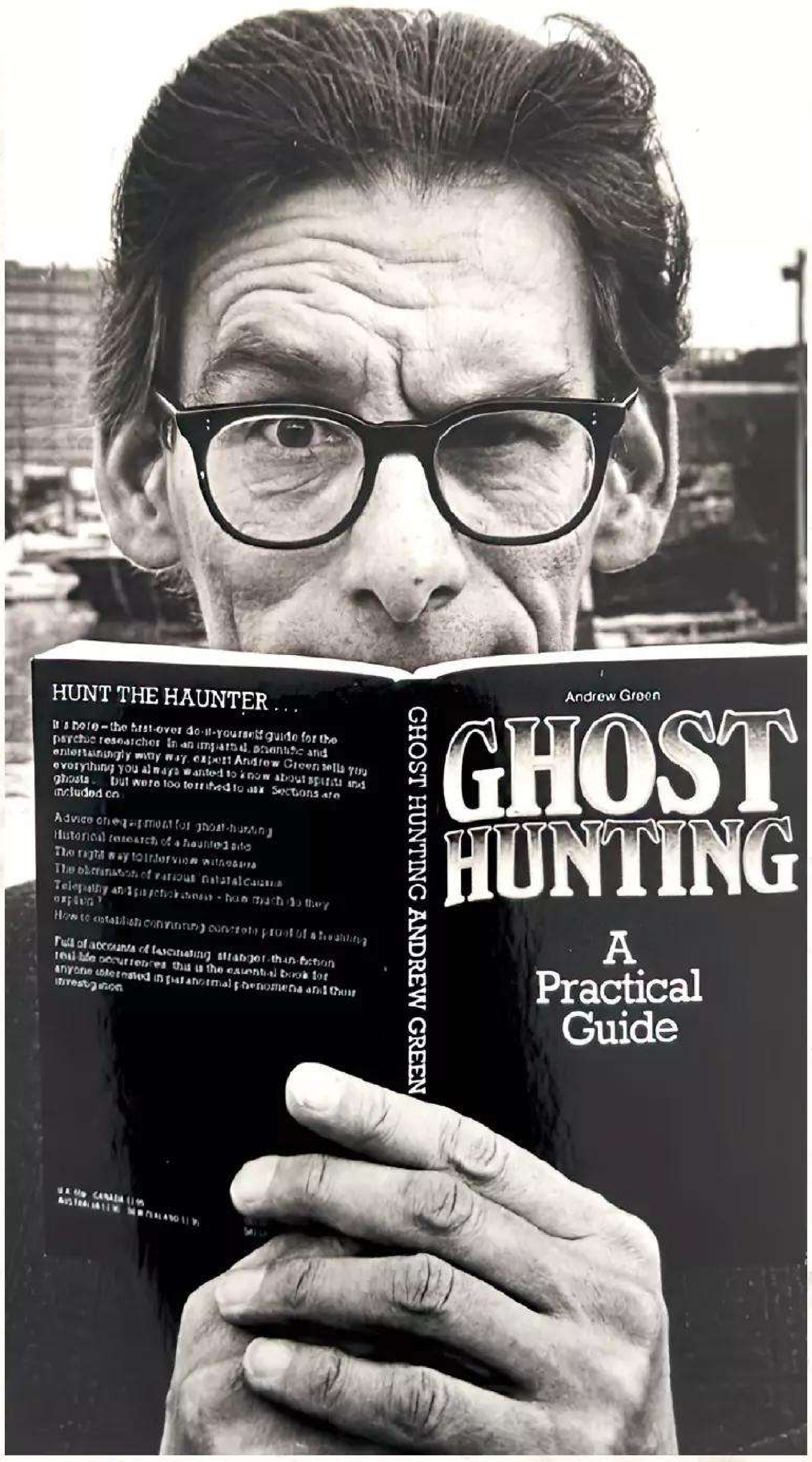
THOROUGHLY MODERN GHOSTS

An effort was made the following year to encourage a more rational outlook on hauntings by Andrew Green (1927-2004) with his gazetteer *Our Haunted Kingdom* (1973). Green found ghosts were rife in workplaces, often troubling staff. Perrott’s scrapbook and notes confirm the pattern. The range of places is quite astonishing, from a Birdseye food factory in Lowestoft to a nuclear power plant in Wales.

In 1970 the *Evening Post* reported workers refusing to work at D Broadhead Furnitures, Appletongate, in Newark, Nottinghamshire, where light fittings mysteriously dropped from ceilings and a voice called out ‘Hullo’ when they entered. Further reports came in April 1972 with two teenage employees refusing to work in the building. In June that year the Port Merion Pottery in Stoke-on-Trent called in a medium following a dark mysterious shape being seen floating across a shelf and sounds of footsteps and coughing scaring female staff.[14]

Green hoped his book *Ghost Hunting: A Practical Guide* (1973), focusing on contemporary cases occurring in modern settings, would encourage a scientific approach to hauntings. He was continually astonished by the amount of superstition still rampant and how people could react in the most extreme ways.

An example collected by Tom Perrott came from Cwmbran, near Pontypool in Monmouthshire, where ‘Phantomania’ was reported. A Mr Charles Price, 63, had acquired an antique wheelbarrow found in Fenton’s Hole, a spot where a man had vanished in a mine shaft in the 19th century. Ever since owning it Mr Price had suffered painful accidents. He joined a number of people, including his 15-year-old son, who had seen a luminous hooded figure prowling a disused block near an old foundry; it also ‘popped up’ in the windows of the derelict buildings. Together with a group of friends, Mr Price went hunting the ghost, armed with a shotgun. They succeeded in spotting the figure with a blurred face that seemed, they said, to “form out of mist”, adding “We even took some shots at it, but the figure remained.” Mr Frank Thomas, secretary of the Aerial Phenomena Research Group in nearby Newport, said he would be investigating.[15]



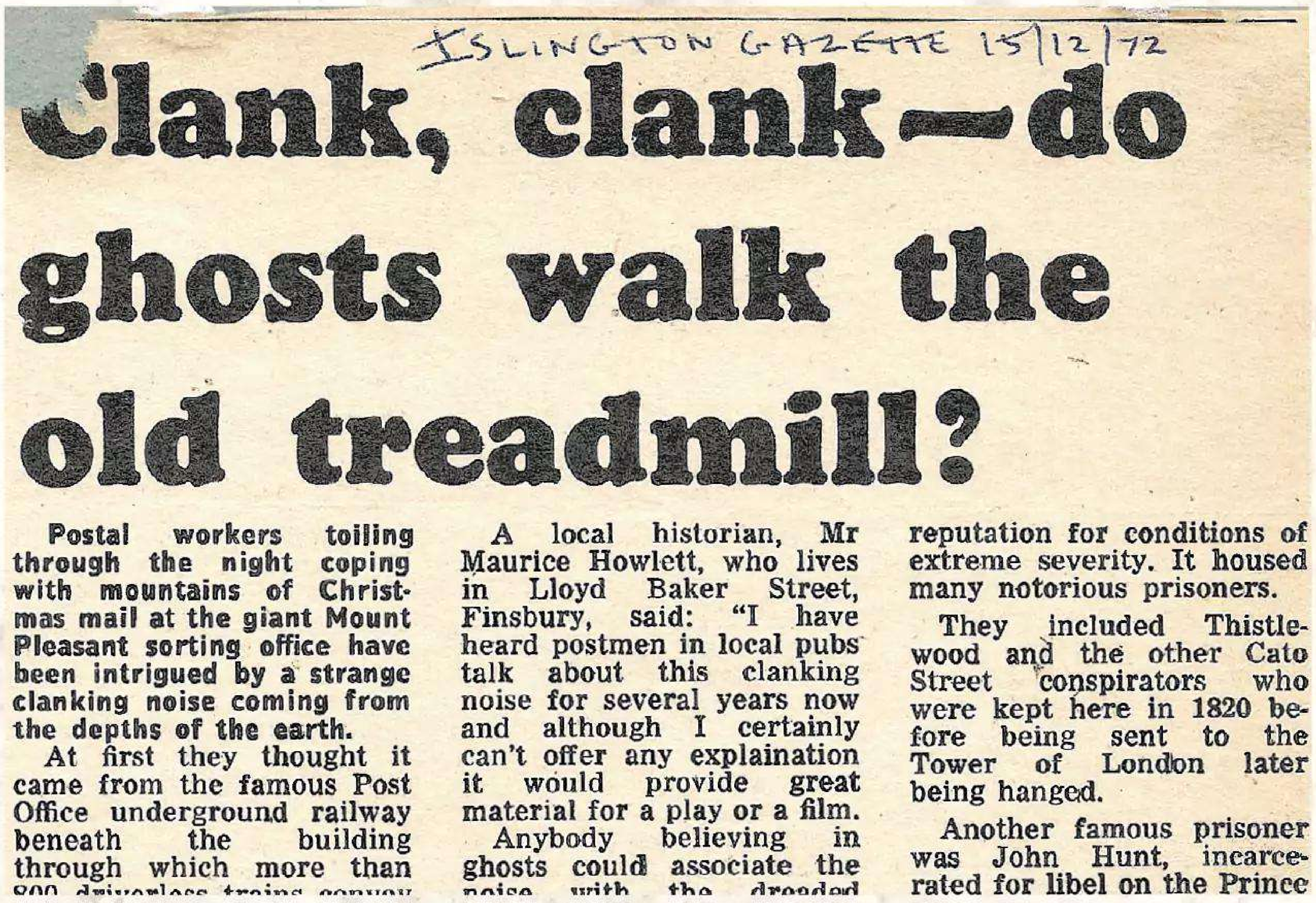
LEFT: Andrew Green tried to bring a more rational approach to the subject in 1973 with his book *Ghost Hunting: A Practical Guide*. **BELOW:** Green found ghosts were rife in modern settings and mundane workplaces, such as London’s Mount Pleasant Sorting Office, plagued by mysterious clanking noises in 1972.

HE WAS ASTONISHED BY THE AMOUNT OF SUPERSTITION STILL RAMPANT AND HOW PEOPLE COULD REACT IN THE MOST EXTREME WAYS

HIGH SPIRITS

The idea of the haunted public house really took off in the early 1970s.

Haunted pub stories proliferated following publication of *The Haunted Inns of England* (1972) by Fleet Street journalist Jack Hallam. The premier haunted London pub of the time was the Plough, near Clapham Common. Here, in September 1970, a doorway to a mystery room was discovered with a sealed window, often seen from the outside to be open. In an adjoining room, a resident barman awoke to see a tall woman with long black hair wearing a white gown



ISLINGTON GAZETTE 15/12/72

Clank, clank—do ghosts walk the old treadmill?

Postal workers toiling through the night coping with mountains of Christmas mail at the giant Mount Pleasant sorting office have been intrigued by a strange clanking noise coming from the depths of the earth.

At first they thought it came from the famous Post Office underground railway beneath the building through which more than 800 driverless trains convey

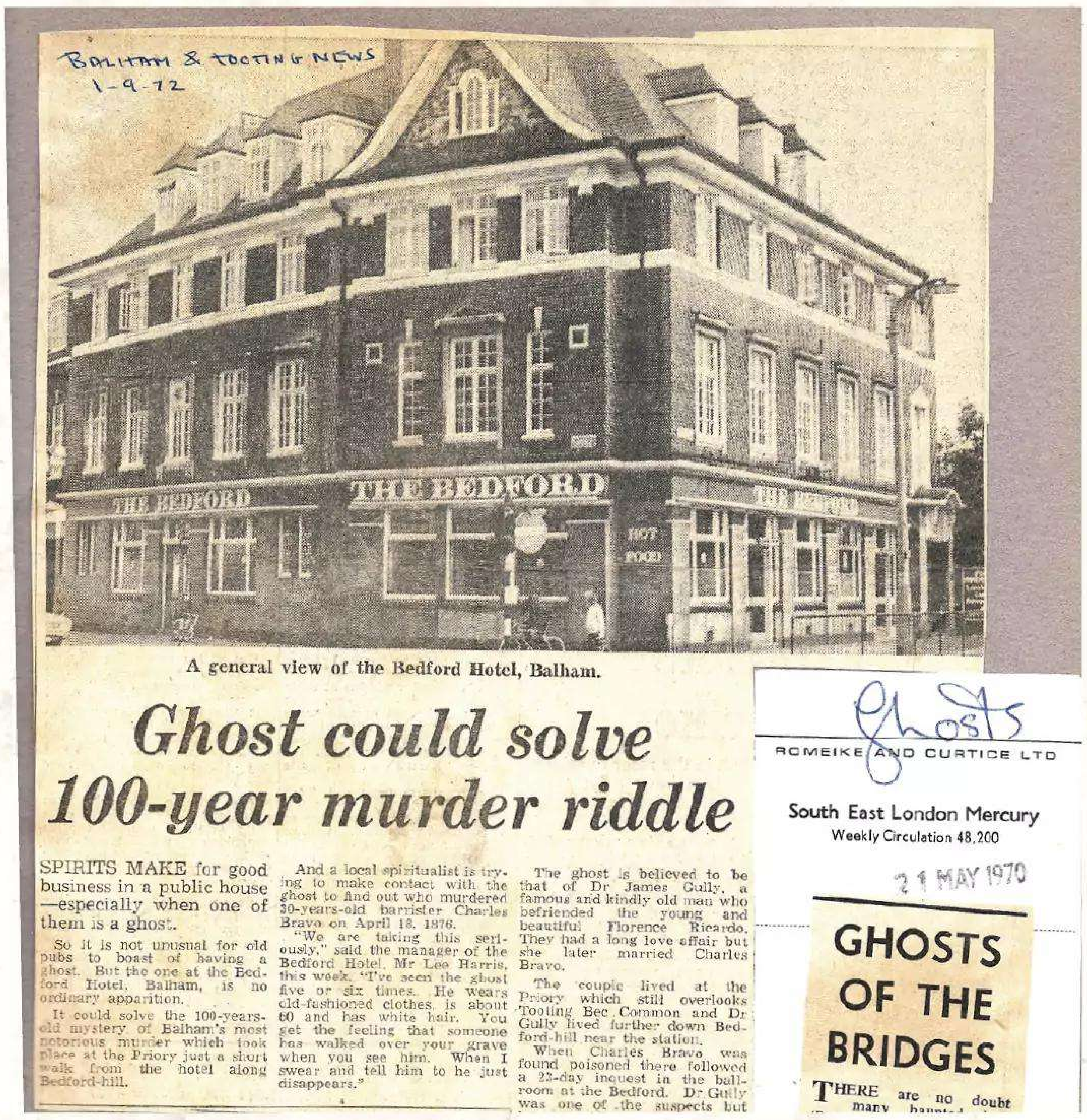
A local historian, Mr Maurice Howlett, who lives in Lloyd Baker Street, Finsbury, said: “I have heard postmen in local pubs talk about this clanking noise for several years now and although I certainly can’t offer any explaination it would provide great material for a play or a film.

Anybody believing in ghosts could associate the noise with the dreaded

reputation for conditions of extreme severity. It housed many notorious prisoners.

They included Thistlewood and the other Cato Street conspirators who were kept here in 1820 before being sent to the Tower of London later being hanged.

Another famous prisoner was John Hunt, incarcerated for libel on the Prince



Balham & Tooting News
1-9-72

A general view of the Bedford Hotel, Balham.

Ghost could solve 100-year murder riddle

SPIRITS MAKE for good business in a public house —especially when one of them is a ghost.

So it is not unusual for old pubs to boast of having a ghost. But the one at the Bedford Hotel, Balham, is no ordinary apparition.

It could solve the 100-years-old mystery of Balham's most notorious murder which took place at the Priory just a short walk from the hotel along Bedford-hill.

And a local spiritualist is trying to make contact with the ghost to find out who murdered 30-years-old barrister Charles Bravo on April 18, 1876.

"We are taking this seriously," said the manager of the Bedford Hotel, Mr Lee Harris, this week. "I've seen the ghost five or six times. He wears old-fashioned clothes, is about 60 and has white hair. You get the feeling that someone has walked over your grave when you see him. When I swear and tell him to he just disappears."

The ghost is believed to be that of Dr James Gully, a famous and kindly old man who befriended the young and beautiful Florence Ricardo. They had a long love affair but she later married Charles Bravo.

The couple lived at the Priory which still overlooks Tooting Bec Common and Dr Gully lived further down Bedford-hill near the station.

When Charles Bravo was found poisoned there followed a 23-day inquest in the ballroom at the Bedford. Dr Gully was one of the suspects but

Ghosts

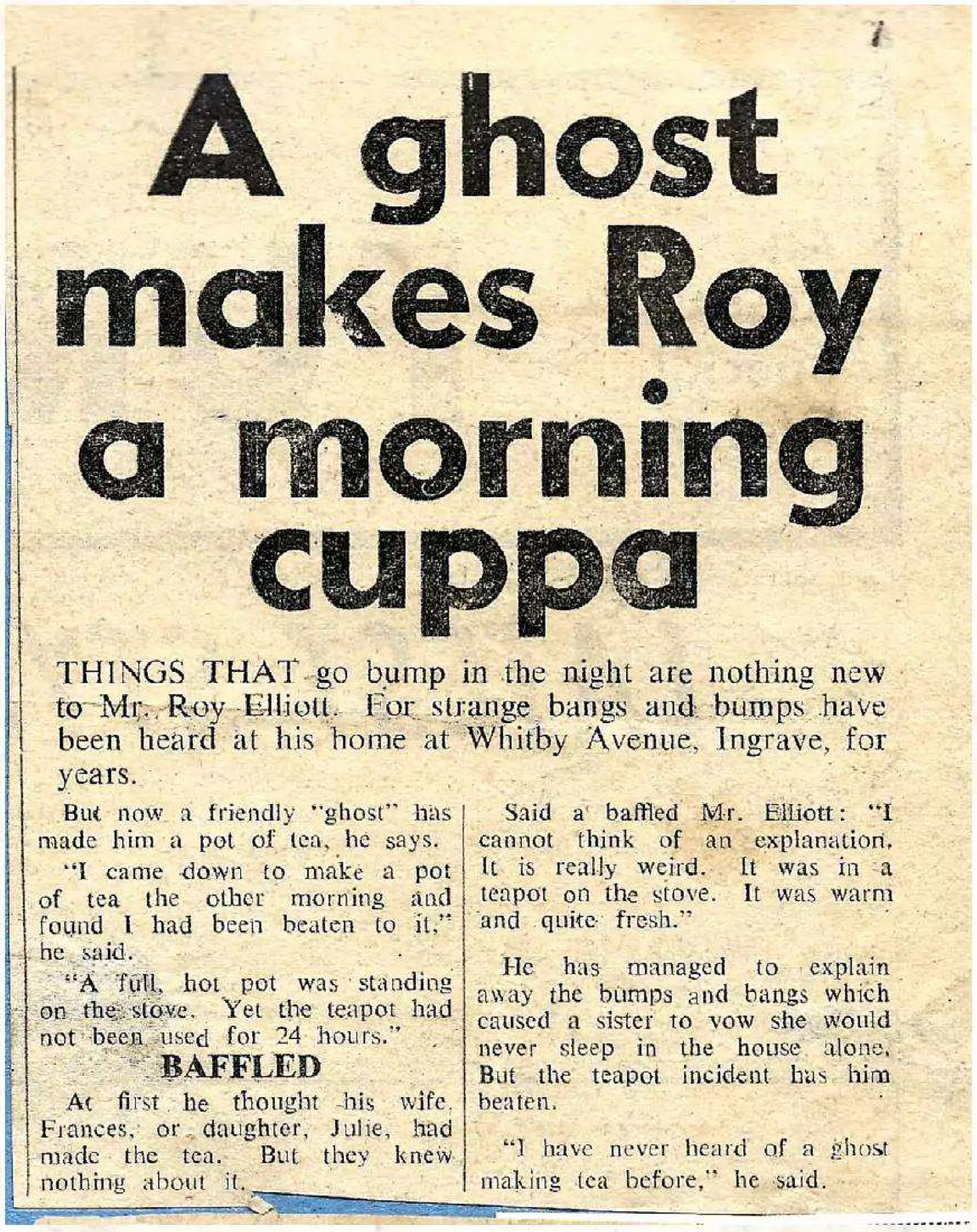
ROMEIKE AND CURTICE LTD

South East London Mercury
Weekly Circulation 48,200

21 MAY 1970

GHOSTS OF THE BRIDGES

THERE are no doubt many



7

A ghost makes Roy a morning cuppa

THINGS THAT go bump in the night are nothing new to Mr. Roy Elliott. For strange bangs and bumps have been heard at his home at Whitby Avenue, Ingrave, for years.

But now a friendly "ghost" has made him a pot of tea, he says.

"I came down to make a pot of tea the other morning and found I had been beaten to it," he said.

"A full, hot pot was standing on the stove. Yet the teapot had not been used for 24 hours."

BAFFLED

At first he thought his wife, Frances, or daughter, Julie, had made the tea. But they knew nothing about it.

Said a baffled Mr. Elliott: "I cannot think of an explanation. It is really weird. It was in a teapot on the stove. It was warm and quite fresh."

He has managed to explain away the bumps and bangs which caused a sister to vow she would never sleep in the house alone. But the teapot incident has him beaten.

"I have never heard of a ghost making tea before," he said.

ABOVE LEFT: Haunted pubs made the news throughout the decade, with the Bedford Hotel in Balham, London, reporting ghostly apparitions and a piano playing by itself. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Some spooks eschewed spirits and preferred a nice cup of tea, like the "friendly ghost" that made Roy Elliott "a morning cuppa".

standing at the window. She slowly faded away before his eyes and the experience was enough to propel him into handing in his notice. The pub dog was frequently frightened by something upstairs that no human could see and weird, inexplicable noises issued from an empty bedroom.

The licensee in 1970 stated that although neither seeing nor hearing anything he had felt a "prickling sensation", as had several other staff members when venturing near the 'haunted' bedroom. He permitted an amateur investigation and séance where the ghost was identified as 'Sarah', resulting in even more publicity. Unfortunately, the brewers felt that enough was enough. A new licensee was swiftly appointed who stated the place was not and never had been haunted. Another pub attracting attention was the rambling Bedford Hotel in Balham where the apparition of a white-haired man had been seen and a piano was heard playing by itself. Some linked this with the local Charles Bravo murder case of 1873.[16] This paled into insignificance with the 25 claimed spooks at the 17th century Three Tuns Inn at Bungay in Suffolk, a claim still made on the Campaign for Real Ale website today.[17] The Bluebell Inn at Belmesthorpe, Lincolnshire, was pervaded by ghostly incense at the time of the Full Moon and a shadowy form appeared in the yard according to Mrs Bradbury, the wife of the landlord. Enquiries ascertained the pub stood on the site of a monastery.[18] In Newcastle, a phantom man with tied-back hair, a red cloak and white breeches was seen striding through the Disco Pub and on one occasion walked through a member of the staff, a barman named Michael.Even former pubs retained their ghosts. "Night after night the old regular wandered through the rooms of his local," wrote a reporter for the *Newcastle Evening Chronicle.* Now his footsteps were being heard again at all hours of the day and night, despite the fact the tavern had closed before World War I and was now a WH Smith warehouse in Mirk Lane, Newcastle.

One employee, Mr Arthur Rayburn, was quoted as saying, without a trace of irony, "It's the sort of thing you don't like to talk about," before proceeding to pour out stories of tramping footsteps around the building which he and six others had all repeatedly heard.

Most extraordinary were claims that a phantom racehorse was haunting Motherwell Trotting Stadium Race Track in Lanarkshire, Scotland. It was believed it was a horse called Lucky Venture that had died on the track the year before. An exorcism was conducted in August 1973. According to the exorcists, during the ceremony the horse manifested surrounded in a "green-blue light" accompanied by the sound of hooves; witnesses reported the air turning cold. Later, horse manure was found on the edge of the track that had not been there before. [19]

NOTES

1 *West Briton,* 4 Nov 1971 and *Scottish Sunday Express* 14 April 1974.

2 *Daily Record,* 30 Oct 1971; *Daily Post*, 21 May 1972.

3 *Essex County Standard,* 13 Feb 1970.

4 *Sketch,* 11 Nov 1970.

5 *Evening Gazette,* 1 Dec 1970.

6 "Watch out for the Ghosts of Foulridge", *Lancashire Evening Telegraph*, 4 April 1970.

7 "Ghost map: All of south east London's haunted locations revealed", *News Shopper,* 21 Oct 2021.

8 *Sunderland Echo*, 18 Nov 1971.

9 *Daily Express,* 8 July 1973.

10 "Aladdin's Lamp Slave was a poltergeist – cleric", *Psychic News,* 3 April 1971.

11 *Willesden Chronicle,* 3 Oct 1970; concerning a ghost at St Mary's, Neasden.

12 *East Anglian Daily Times,* 5 Mar 1971; Andrew Green, *Ghost Hunting A Practical Guide* (1973).

13 "The 'Ryedale Ghost Hunt", *The Mercury*, 16 December 1972.

14 *Notts Evening Post*, 27 Oct 1970; and 8 April 1972. Further phenomena were reported in April 1993 at a café situated at 15 Appletongate; see article by John Knight in *The Psi Researcher* No 15, April 1994.

15 "Will the Ghost of Fenton's Hole appear again?", *Free Press Pontypool*, 15 June 1973.

16 "Ghost could solve a 100-year-old murder", *Balham & Tooting News*, 1 Sept 1972; *Yorkshire Post*, 6 June 1972.

17 https://suffolk.camra.org.uk/pub/112

18 *Lincoln Rutland and Stamford Mercury*, 24 Dec 1970.

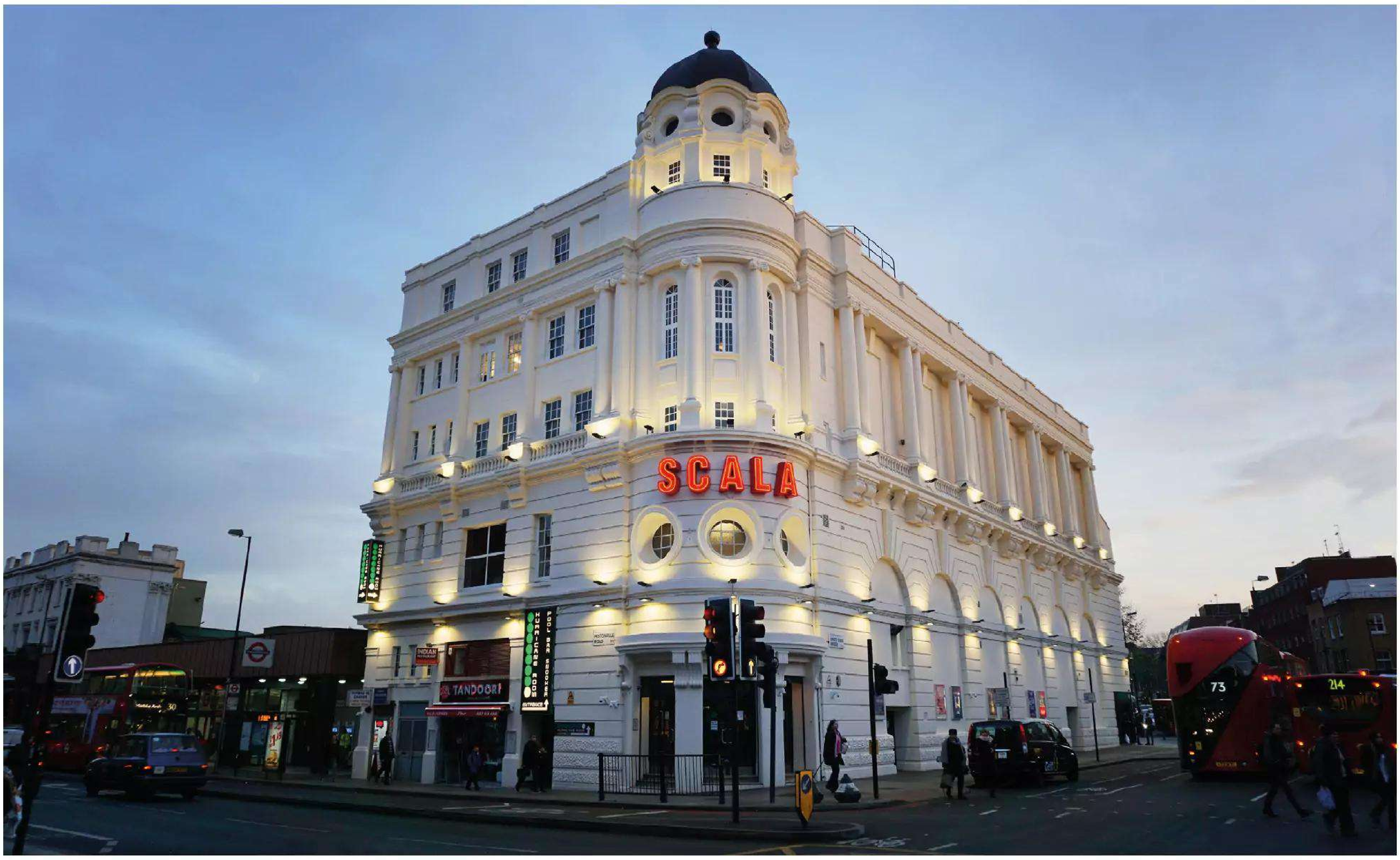
19 "Ghost Horse Exorcised?", *News of the World*, 5 Aug 1974; *Psychic News*, 10 Aug 1974

With many thanks to the late Tom Perrott, the late Doris Perrott, the Ghost Club and Claire Davy for help at various stages.

ALAN MURDIE is a lawyer and writer with a longstanding interest in fortean phenomena. A member of the Society for Psychical Research and a former president of the Ghost Club, he compiles the monthly Ghostwatch column in *Fortean Times*.

TEENAGE ST PANCRAS AND THE WHITE GODDESS OF KING'S CROSS

In the heart of King's Cross, a freshly painted white fairy tale castle stands on stilts astride the underground train lines below. Her red neon sign reads SCALA. Every other night there are queues round the block for different music events. Metal goth kids. Ravers. University students having a ball. The Scala has seen it all and is now the subject of a new feature-length big-screen documentary charting the rise and fall of the world's wildest cinema. First time filmmakers **JANE GILES**, Scala programmer from 1988-1992, and **ALI CATTERALL**, then a troubled teenage audience member, reflect on the hauntology and magic of their 'White Goddess'.

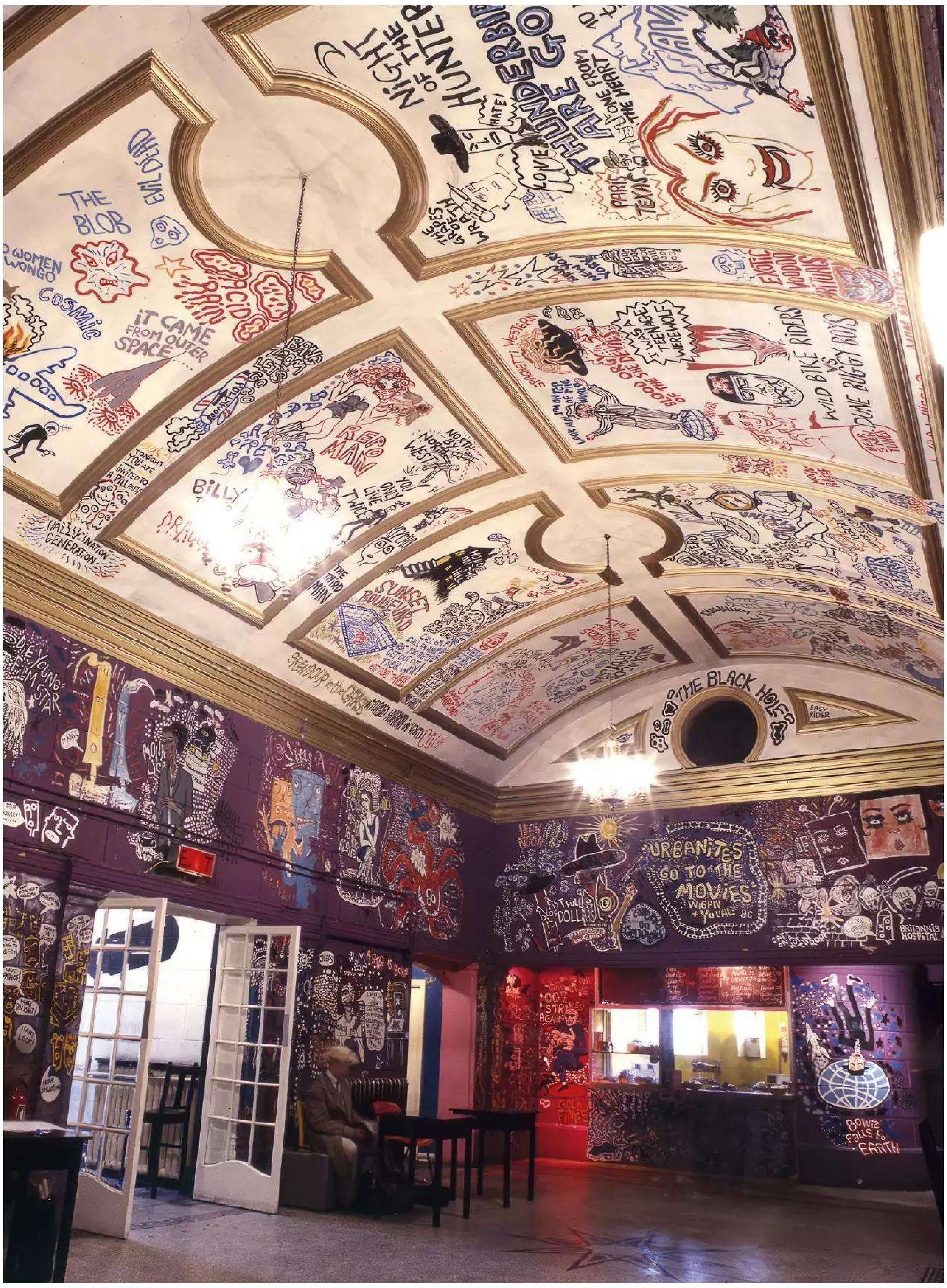


> *"A long time ago, I started reading about this idea of sense and spirit of place. And I'm convinced part of that is included in a building's acoustics. We all know this: if you go to somebody's house, quite often people say there's an atmosphere to it and it can be good or bad. And part of that, I'm sure, is the acoustics."* (Chris Watson, sound engineer)

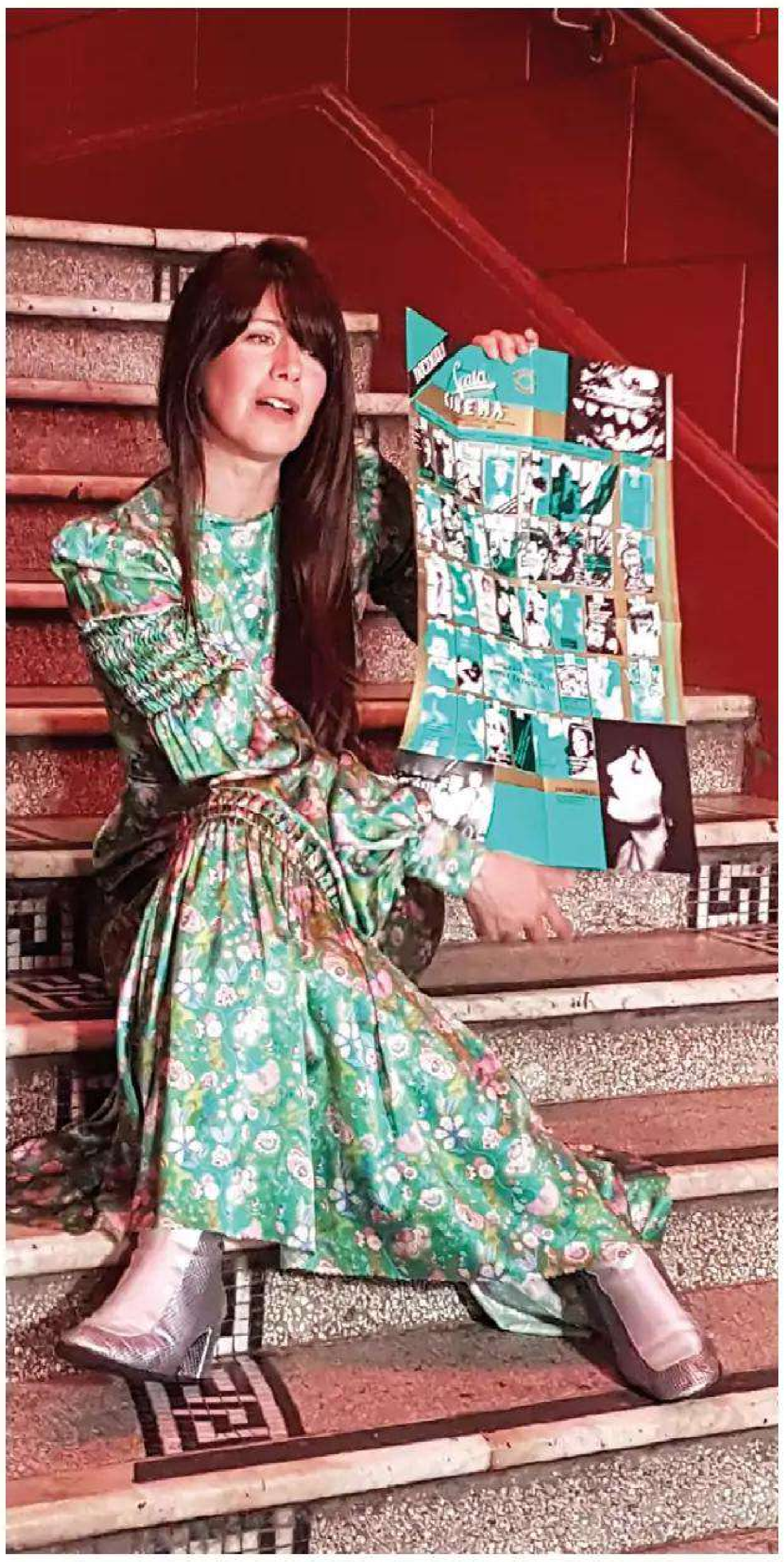
On 4 September 1913 the London County Council received a letter of intent from one David Philips. He had leased the site on the corner of Pentonville Road and New Road Bridge (now King's Cross Bridge) and was planning to build a cinema. Architectural plans were approved the following year, but during the Great War the building was used as a munitions factory, and then a labour exchange. It finally opened in 1920 as the King's Cross Cinema, a 1,500-seat picture palace showing silent movies with live musical accompaniment. Since then, the Scala has been through half-a-dozen different incarnations, including various picture house chains plus weekend rock gigs in the early 1970s. It was even a short-lived 'Primatarium' with jungle murals, fake foliage, and a 40-foot waterfall running through its centre.

> **FOR KIDS WHO WEREN'T SPORTY OR SCRAPPY, THE SCALA WAS A HAVEN, A RETREAT, A SHELTER**

While spirituality has no form, anything onto which people project their deepest desires and dreams can be a god. So, whether serving as movie palace, monkey house or nightclub, the collective energies generated through regular ritual and worship by the venue's diverse, ever-changing communities for more than a century have reinforced her considerable powers. When infamous 'sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll' repertory cinema the Scala moved from Fitzrovia into the King's Cross building in mid-1981, the legend really took off, assuring her divinity as she changed



ROB BROWN



LEFT: The Scala foyer in its heyday in 1986. **ABOVE**: Actor, film-maker and one-time Scala habitué Caroline Catz sits on the cinema's staircase and shares her memories of the venue for the new film.

lives by turning the audience on to the power of movies. Kneeling at her tattered celluloid altar, or in her darkest corners, for different reasons, her young disciples would go on to become filmmakers, musicians, writers, actors, artists and activists, spreading her sweetly subversive message to the masses, that high and low art can be of equal import. And like all gods, in return she required loyalty.

As a tribute to the primates, the first film screened at the King's Cross Scala cinema was *King Kong* (1933). The smell of the damp caused by the Primatarium waterfall lingered for years, along with the myth that the whiff was that of dead monkeys, or at least their piddle and shit. One night a Scala usher found a stairway cupboard full of netting, forestry, and some kind of stuffed creature. Her memory was of "something like Narnia, but malevolent", a space that threatened to draw her in. She slammed the door and fled. When she looked again for the cupboard, she couldn't find it.

Despite the darkness and its steep rake, the Scala always felt safe. The worst that could happen was the unexpected arrival of Huston the cinema cat, brushing past the legs of unsuspecting audiences as he made his way through packed rows during horror films. For kids who weren't sporty or scrappy, the Scala was a haven, a retreat; for some, a literal shelter, whether for 90-minutes or for hours on end, to escape from the stultifying constraints or secret horrors of home. What they saw on its vast, beer-splattered screen in that cavernous auditorium could put it all to one side.

"King's Cross was rough as fuck," says filmmaker Ben Wheatley who lived up the road in Camden at the time. "It was almost mediæval down there. So, to go for an evening, to go to the cinema, was a bit of an adventure." Charged with ley-line energy, this was the site of William Blake's *Jerusalem*, home to the lovers Rimbaud and Verlaine. The River Fleet had been rerouted underground to make way for the railway terminus in 1850, opening the floodgates to a transient population which would become bedevilled by drugs and prostitution.

The populace of King's Cross is watched over by a statue of Britannia who stands atop St Pancras train station near the ancient site of the first church in England; the residents of its graveyard include founding feminist matriarch Mary Wollstonecraft, who was also the literal mother of *Frankenstein* author Mary Shelley. Beheaded for his faith aged 14 in AD 304, St Pancras is the patron saint of teenagers, work, and health. His name means "the one that holds everything together" and his Saint's Day is 12 May, which is also the birthday of *SCALA!!!* filmmaker Ali Catterall.

Ali first chanced upon the Scala one mid-Eighties autumn afternoon when he was 16. A school drop-out retaking his O-levels up the road in Kingsway College, "something about her ruined Art Deco façade, like a house of curiosities from a Ray Bradbury carnival, swept me in with the leaves," he recalled. The cinema was showing Alan Parker's *Birdy*, a haunting but ultimately uplifting story of obsession and mental illness that resonated deeply. Although initially daunting, the Scala became a strange mirror-image for Ali's homelife.

Ali was born the mixed-race result of a Free Love affair with a passing Iraqi student, and his Antipodean single mother took her baby hitchhiking the hippy trail across Europe, sleeping in caves and ditches, before settling beneath the breadline in barely habitable short-life housing off the King's Road, directly facing the Lots Road Power Station. Their place was overrun with mice, hippie paraphernalia, lentil curries and – courtesy of a newly installed common-law stepfather –

hundreds of yellowing paperbacks on poetry, Sufism, and sci-fi. Outside of the recognised class system, they were “poor, with books”.

Though located south-west of Notting Hill, this was very much the country of Nic Roeg and Donald Cammell’s film *Performance* (1970) and, like an archipelago of otherness, Ali and family were surrounded by fellow Bohos. Below them lived an American performance poet who held open house for fellow artists, political dissidents, and an up-and-coming visiting musician called Philip Glass. Next door, a modern classical composer, and Barrie, an underground filmmaker from Down Under. He’d cameoed as a fascist in the alt-history classic, *It Happened Here* (1964) and was visited off and on by his friend Bertrand Tavernier, who’d later direct *Round Midnight* (1986). Though a toddler, Ali still remembers Barrie’s film nights, “crawling over cushions, alongside sprawled hippies, as he’d project *film noir* classics and exploitation movies on the back yard wall, late into the evening”.

SCAFFOLDING BY
GEORGIAN
PRIMAT

DAVID BABSKY

LEFT: The former Primatarium in King’s Cross becoming the Scala cinema, 1981. **BELOW**: Scala fixture John Waters, interviewed in the new film.

It was a virtual primer for the Scala, and incredibly cinematic. “It seemed natural that film crews and commercials and music video directors haunted our run-down area for years looking for gritty atmospheres,” said Ali. To him, Lots Road came to feel like an enormous sound stage on which his family’s friends worked as film extras and movie modelmakers. It brought home the idea that “the worlds of film and filmmaking were within touching distance. That both fantasy and reality could be punctured like skin”.

But the family was also marinated in insanity, a cult in all but name, revolving around the worship of the stepfather: an adherent of Aleister Crowley and practising warlock, he taped a vast heptagram on the bowed living room ceiling, and on the doors chalked protective sigils “to plug the psychic leaks”. Ali witnessed two attempted break-ins by the astral form of a man, first hovering outside his second-storey bedroom window, and then attempting to rise up through the floorboards. The interloper was a fellow Crowleyite who’d tried to grow himself a third set of teeth through magickal ritual. He was thwarted on both occasions, proving the worth of the stepfather’s sigils to the horrified child.

ALI ONCE SAW A 10-INCH FIGURINE RISE FROM ITS PLINTH AND WALK ACROSS THE LIVING ROOM

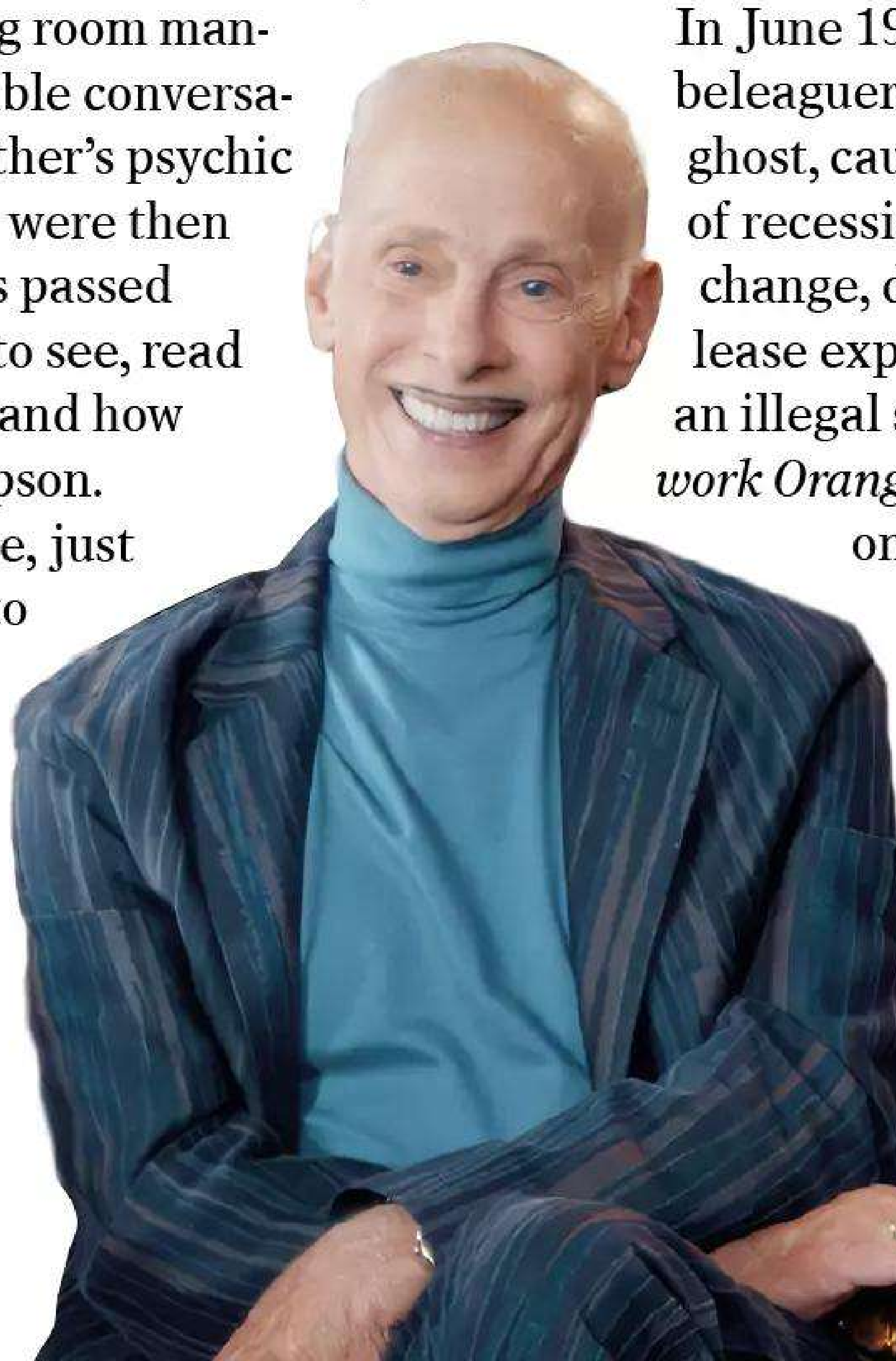
Ali was subjected to “almost ritualised” daily assaults that became death threats as he grew into his teens; at school, his bruises were passed off as youthful boisterousness. And then, one day, his teacher didn’t show up, having suffered a miscarriage at five-and-a-half months. “According to mum, my stepfather had placed a curse on my teacher, for scoffing to me that goblins didn’t exist. She’d watched him perform it, with oils, chants, and crystals.” As explained to Ali, his teacher had attempted to kill his child-like sense of wonder, and in turn, the curse had resulted in the removal of a young life. It was how curses worked: like for like.

Supernatural incidents were commonplace. Ali once saw a 10-inch (25cm) figurine, an 11th-century Vajrasattva, rise from its plinth and walk across the living room mantlepiece. Meanwhile, kitchen table conversation revolved around his stepfather’s psychic battles with rival sorcerers who were then killed in the process, mountains passed through in Sadhu-fashion, how to see, read and catch other people’s auras, and how hard he was about to hit his stepson.

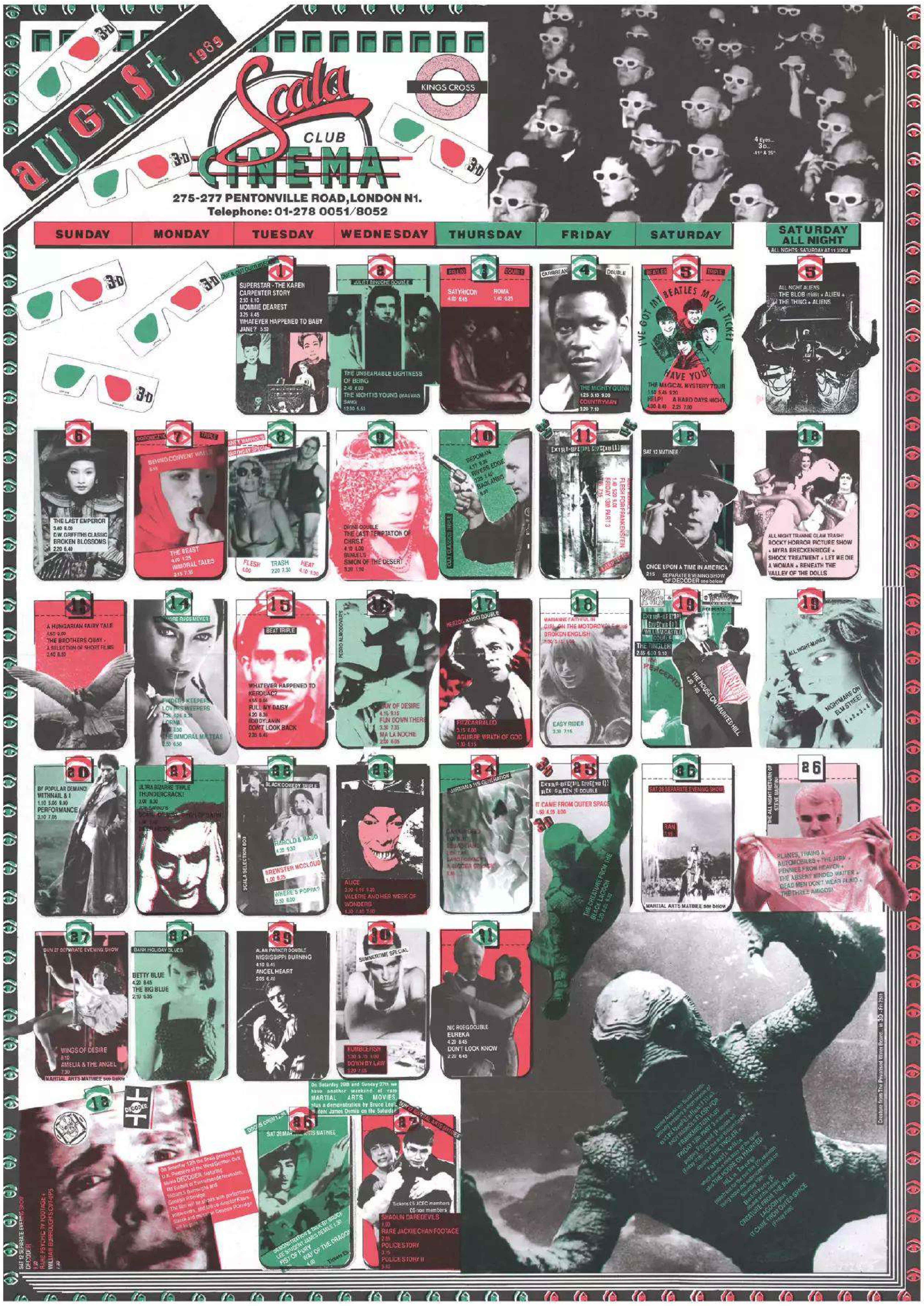
When the family moved house, just a couple of streets away, it was to a dilapidated building with gaping craters in the roof and floors, and no hot water. “At school, I’d fall asleep in lessons with exhaustion, and was routinely bawled out by pupils and teachers alike because I stank.” Ali became the holder of secrets so terrible that, it was threatened, if he ever repeated them, his stepfather would have him and his mother killed. The stepfather claimed to be both Jesus and the Devil, also an officer in the SAS, which was how he’d ended up as an assassin for MI6, disposing of IRA members in the nearby Chelsea Embankment. “He said he was having me followed by fellow spies. At 15 I was shouting at strangers in the street to leave me alone because I knew who they were.”

One day in 1987, Ali’s bedroom ceiling collapsed while he was watching the Des O’Connor show on a little black and white television. As the dust cleared, it left a hole the size of the average front door, through which you could see the sky. With a large, leaking fissure directly above the bed, Ali slept on a mattress on the floor, surrounded by dozens of buckets and Tupperware containers, “tick-tocking with the rain orchestra”. Pigeons flew in panicked circles around the room. Nesting in the smashed teeth of the rafters, their strangulated cooing provided a constant soundtrack.

This, then, was Ali Catterall’s life at the time he discovered the Scala, a repository for the weird, the unloved, and passed-over – both audience and films. The content of the movies he saw there were as surreal, disturbing, and outlandish as anything from his home life. And yet, somehow, fiction offered a safety net: a filter, a crucial remove from reality. “The Scala became my refuge, a place to lose myself,” he says. “And for the following few years, I got very, very lost.”



In June 1993, the increasingly beleaguered Scala gave up the ghost, caught in a perfect storm of recession, technological change, dwindling audiences, lease expiry and the fallout from an illegal screening of *A Clockwork Orange*. That same summer, on the day the builders moved in to forcibly patch up their condemned family house, Ali discovered another secret. His stepfather had been



LEFT: The iconic Scala programme poster; this example is from August 1989. BELOW: Roy, one of the legendary Scala cats, in the office, 1990.

MAIR PAYNE

sleeping with half the postcode, including an eager young disciple of magick: Ali's first girlfriend. Battle commenced, with curses flung back and forth in furious psychic warfare until the cult finally imploded.

While filming our documentary in the Scala, we hired veteran sound recordist Chris Watson to place contact mics and ultrasound devices throughout the building. Chris was a founder member of the electronic band Cabaret Voltaire, and later, David Attenborough's soundman on the *Life* series, and we asked him to capture the signature rumble of the underground trains reverberating throughout the building and its other mysterious noises to form part of the soundtrack to our film. Much taken with the Scala, Chris described it as a cathedral-like space in central London, with its beating heart "the Northern line coming up volcano-like through the entire fabric of the building… it's such a rich place to explore."

Asked to explain what he could hear, he told us: "It's full of rhythms and vibrations, and some would say music… Right at the apex of the Scala, on the roof, there's a small service entrance into what is above the rest of the building. It's one of those magical places; it's very dark, and whatever's in there makes these amazing sounds. It reminded me of *Eraserhead*, and Alan Splet's fantastic sound work, because there's a deep, low, quite malevolent rumble – *you* can't tell where it comes from, because it's low frequency – and then these intermittent high frequency whines and grinds and whispers."

Jane Giles mentioned that she once worked in a cinema that had been a Corn Exchange, apparently built on the site of an old burial ground. Walking through the small second screen to the projection box, you never wanted to look behind you, and the middle-aged usherettes experienced the same sensation as when their babies cried. In response, Chris told us how the always unflappable David Attenborough was spooked while recording the sound of silence in Robert Falcon Scott's remote Antarctic hut.

Chris's description of acoustics and atmosphere recall the 'Stone Tape' theory, which suggests that ghosts and hauntings are akin to tape recordings, emotional or traumatic events that have been projected onto objects to be later replayed. He concluded: "It's such a privilege to get into these places, because quite often we're excluded from them, but when you do, you realise the sounds of this place are a big part of the character of it, and it's speaking all the time, even when there's nobody in it – it resonates. And the apex of that is within this dark, mysterious place called 'The Void.'"

While we wait for Chris to finish recording the Void, Ali sees the apparition of a man in what would have been the corridors of the cinema back in January 1985, when one of the Scala's audience members jumped to his death from a top-floor window during an All-Nighter. We're filming in a cavernous, unstaffed venue still locked down after Covid-19 and it's hard not to feel shivery. It's one of many strange moments we encounter while making this documentary, including a curious coincidence when someone who scornfully refuses to help with the filming finds his studio basement flooded with sewage. But things change and what we don't yet know is that our X-rated love letter to the Scala will screen at the 2023 London Film Festival with Ali seated next to his long-lost biological father and newly discovered wonderful half-sisters.

The warlock is dead. The White Goddess embraces the faithful. Her magic is real.

***SCALA!!!* directed by Jane Giles and Ali Catterall is on cinema release UK-wide from 5 January 2024 and will be available on BFI Blu-ray and on BFI Player from 22 January 2024.**

ALI CATTERALL is writing a memoir about his unusual childhood. **JANE GILES** is the author of *Scala Cinema 1978-1993*, Fab Press 2018.

TAKE ME TO YOUR LEADERS

DAVID CLARKE examines the tangled history of NASA's relationship with the UFO controversy

NASA / AUBREY GEMIGNANI

ABOVE: At the press conference, NASA Administrator Bill Nelson said that NASA sought to shift UAP discussions "from sensationalism to science".

At a live-streamed press conference early in September, NASA's leadership described what the US Congress now defines as Unidentified Anomalous Phenomena as "one of our planet's greatest mysteries".[1] Alongside this extraordinary admission, the space agency declared itself ready and willing to become embroiled in a controversy they have avoided for six decades.

NASA was created in 1958 at the dawn of the Space Age following the launch by the Soviet Union of the first artificial Earth satellite, Sputnik 1. The trigger for the Space Race eventually led to the Apollo programme that took astronauts to the Moon and coincided with a series of UFO waves. Ever since the first astronauts left Earth orbit claims have been made about cover-ups of sightings of unexplained objects both *en route* to the Moon and from the lunar surface (see **FT380:34-41**). But throughout the 1960s, NASA – whose remit would appear to make it the pre-eminent agency to investigate anomalies in the air and space – preferred to leave the US Air Force to pursue UFOs. From 1952 the lead was taken by the much-maligned Project Blue Book, which collected 12,618 sightings from the birth of the modern UFO era.

WHAT PROMPTED NASA'S SUDDEN U-TURN ON UAPs?

In 1968, the University of Colorado accepted a USAF contract to examine their data in what became known as 'the Condon Report' after the project leader, physicist Dr Edward Condon. The Colorado study decided that 90 per cent of the reports they studied could be related to ordinary phenomena, both natural and man-made. It found no evidence that any UFO had ever posed a threat to national security and there was no evidence that any categorised as 'unidentified' were extraterrestrial spacecraft.[2] Their conclusion that little if anything had been learned from the study of UFOs that added to scientific knowledge and further investigation was not justified was later endorsed by a panel of the National Academy of Sciences. The Condon Report provided the US Air Force with an opportunity to wash its hands of the UFO 'problem'. After 1970, it avoided any further public role in the investigation of reported sightings.

But what prompted NASA's sudden U-turn on UAPs? And why would the agency, when resources are stretched by ambitious science projects such as the Artemis rocket mission to the Moon, decide to follow a path they

RUBIN OBSERVATORY

JOEL KOWSKY / NASA

ABOVE LEFT: The Vera C Rubin Observatory, under construction in northern Chile, will be capable of mapping the entire available night sky using the largest digital camera ever built. **ABOVE RIGHT:** The UAP committee chair, astrophysicist Dr David Spergel of Stanford University.

had previously avoided? NASA's newfound enthusiasm stands in stark contrast to 1977, when its leadership rejected overtures from the White House, which wanted a panel of experts to review the best cases since the closure of Blue Book (see panel: Jimmy Carter's UFO).

In 2011, more than 12,000 people signed an online petition that called upon the US Government to "formally acknowledge an extraterrestrial presence on Earth" and demanded that President Barack Obama reveal the content of any government communications with extraterrestrials. The White House asked NASA to respond on its behalf and Phil Larson from the Office of Science and Technology said the US government possessed "no evidence that any life exists outside our planet or that an extraterrestrial presence has contacted or engaged any member of the human race." There was no credible information suggesting evidence of ET contact was being hidden from the public, and Larson pointed out that NASA had been involved in the Search for Extraterrestrial Intelligence (SETI) since the 1960s (see **FT157:42-46**). Ironically, its more ambitious plans for a SETI programme were cancelled by Congress in 1993 on the grounds of cost.[3] At the time, Senator Richard Bryan said that "this hopefully will be the end of the Martian hunting season at the tax-payers expense." NASA remained committed to SETI via other programmes, such as the Kepler space telescope launched in 2009, which had a primary objective to search for Earth-sized exoplanets orbiting distant suns that might harbour life (it detected 2,778 before retirement in 2018).

But the agency ignored the UFO phenomenon until June 2022 when officials announced the creation of an independent study panel to examine how NASA could investigate a mystery that refuses to go away. At its first live-streamed public meeting in May this year, NASA admitted that UAP had "captured the attention of the public, the scientific community and the government alike," and that as a result, "it is now our collective responsibility to investigate these occurrences with the rigorous scientific scrutiny that they deserve." The impetus for the U-turn appears to have been political, led by NASA administrator Senator Bill Nelson. Unlike his predecessors, Nelson believes that "exploring the unknown" should be embedded in the agency's DNA. He felt the study was needed for several reasons, including better understanding of the world and enhancing what he calls "situational awareness" of threats posed by UAP to airspace safety. The sense of urgency and timeliness follows events in February when the US Air Force shot down a Chinese spy balloon as it manoeuvred above the Midwest (see **FT430:28-29, 432:13**).

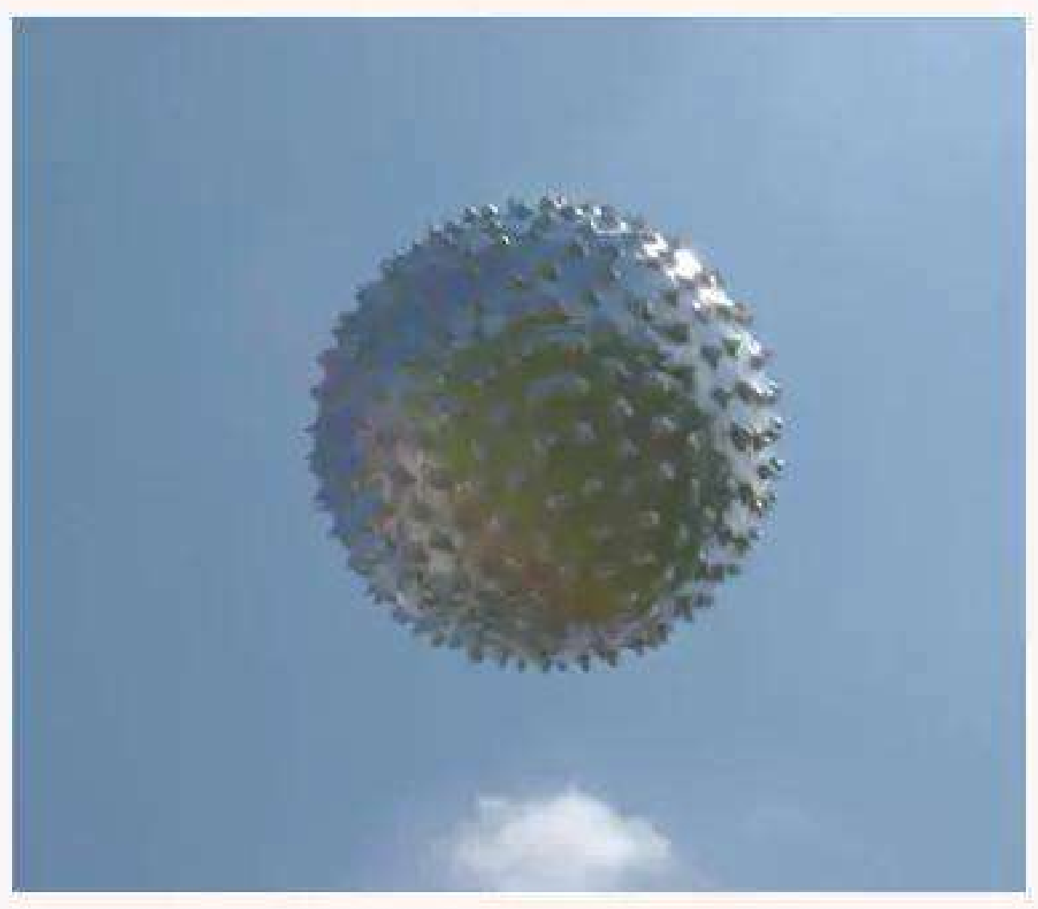
The UAP committee chair, astrophysicist Dr David Spergel of Stanford University, explained the panel's purpose was to collaborate with, but not to duplicate the work of, the All-Domain Anomaly Resolution Office (AARO), the Pentagon's existing UAP task force. Led by Dr Sean Kirkpatrick, AARO is investigating 800 reports received since the creation of the newly re-branded Pentagon-led inquiry. The panel's purpose is neither to "look at grainy footage of UAPs" nor to review historical incidents, but to "create a road map" for how NASA might collect reliable data and apply a rigorous, evidence-based approach to separate fact from fiction (see panel: the NASA roadmap). In the process, Spergel said, NASA wants to "shift the conversation from sensationalism to science".

But the scale of this task was obvious at the press launch of their science-heavy report in Washington DC. Just a day before the launch, media attention was distracted by news that two alleged 'non-human' alien fossils had been displayed at a farcical official hearing held in Mexico City (**FT437:15**). The panel was also quizzed by journalists keen to obtain NASA's reaction to so-called whistleblower David Grusch's claims about the cosmic Watergate that were aired at a Congressional hearing on 26 July (**FT436:28-31**). The brief response was left to Senator Nelson who, invoking Joe Friday's catchphrase from the TV show *Dragnet* said: "Just the facts, ma'am."

The panel's laudable aim of dragging UFO research into the arena of science is outlined in their illustrated 33-page report. Unsurprisingly, it contains no new information about what it calls "recent sightings" and avoids discussion of any specific incidents apart from a demolition of the 'GO FAST' footage captured by US Navy pilots from the *USS Theodore Roosevelt* in 2014.[4] Most of the text sets out how NASA might in future harness its considerable resources to study UAP, a process that looks suspiciously like a bid by the agency for a budget that they refused to discuss with the media. Despite all the talk of unique scientific opportunities it seems likely that NASA's leadership have decided that if Congress wants to commit precious funding to UAP research, then they want a slice of it.

The NASA report was produced by the panel of 16 independent experts recruited from a range of backgrounds in science, space exploration, technology and aerospace safety. One of the most revealing lines in the discussion section says that "a vital part of NASA's mission is to explore the unknown", adding that "the most exciting aspect of exploration is discovering unexplained phenomena". Dr Spergel said the agency had no agenda, but was keen to announce they had already found "no evidence that UAP are ex-

NASA'S ROADMAP FOR FUTURE UAP STUDIES



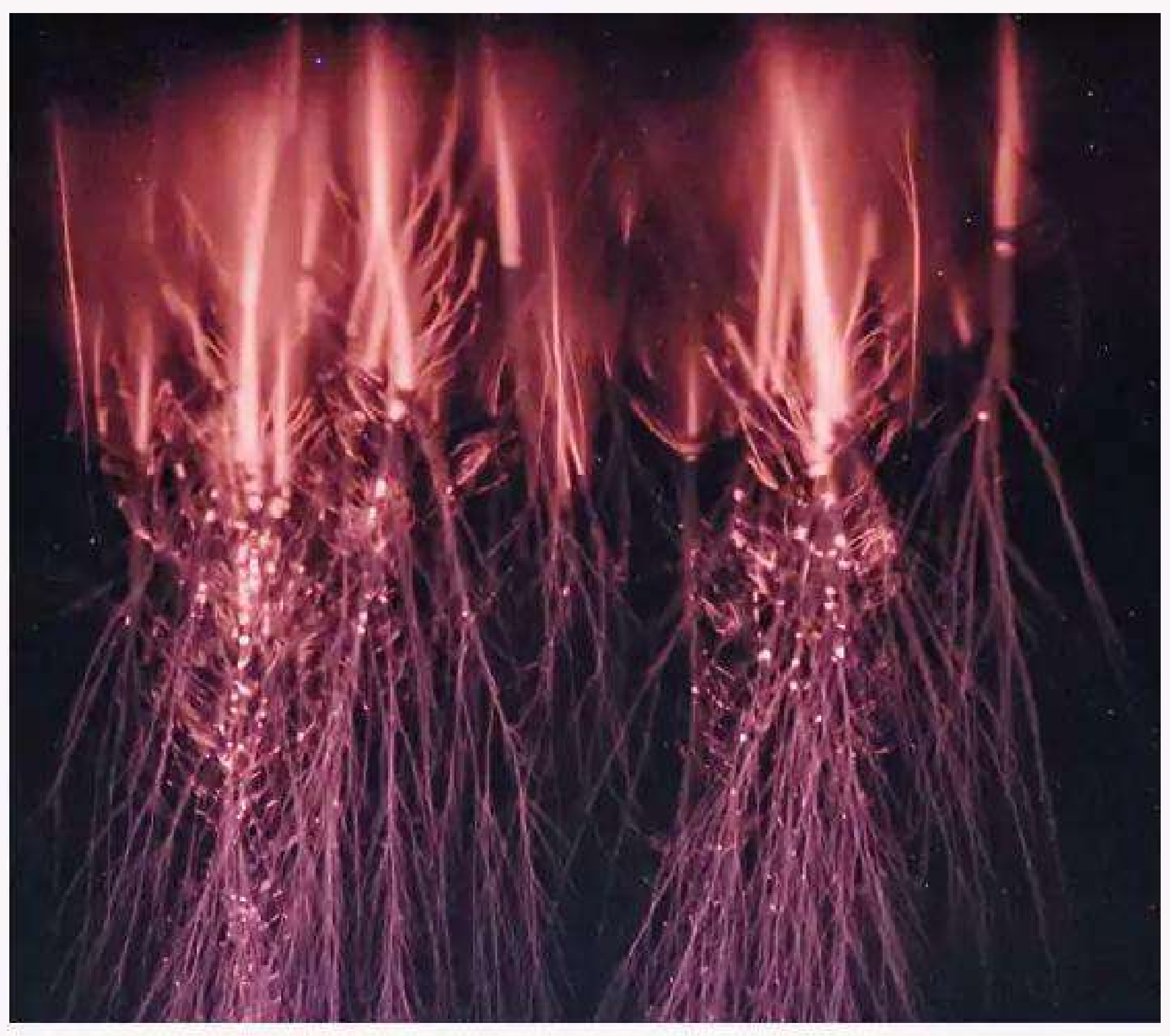
NASA

Although short on detail the report from NASA's independent study team is confident the agency can play a prominent role in the US Government's efforts to shed light on the origin and nature of UAP. It is illustrated with colour images of natural phenomena, including the aurora borealis and 'red sprites', a spectacular type of lightning flash that occurs in clusters at 50-90km (31-56 miles) above the troposphere. Man-made objects frequently mistaken for UAP include balloons of all shapes and sizes, such as the reflective examples released from NASA's weather station at Cape Canaveral.

The report is organised as a series of responses to eight questions set out in the Terms of Reference that NASA supplied to their panel of experts. A key problem is the lack of good quality data, highlighting the importance of detecting UAP "with multiple, well calibrated sensors". NASA's fleet of orbiting satellites would appear to be best placed to capture images of anomalies, but they lack the spatial resolution to detect relatively small objects in Earth's atmosphere. NASA are exploring their links with civilian satellite and weather radars to distinguish "interesting objects" from the clutter. They also aim to harness the powerful Vera C Rubin Observatory, currently under construction in northern Chile, to assist in their search for unknown objects beyond the atmosphere of the Earth. The wide-field reflecting telescope will be capable of mapping the entire available night sky using the largest digital camera ever built in search of 'transient astronomical events' – and UAP.

Panel chair Dr David Spergel, of Stanford University, cautions that identifying a truly anomalous signal in the noise of a dataset is "like looking for a needle in a haystack". The report says there are two approaches to detecting anomalies. The first involves building a model that includes the signals you think you are looking for and then interrogating the data in search of them; but as no one has a clear and consistent definition of what a UAP is, this method is unlikely to bear fruit. The second approach is to gain an understanding of what is agreed to be the 'normal' background in an area to be searched, and then to go looking for "what is unusual and unknown". Dr Spergel explains this by returning to his haystack analogy – in order to find the needle, you need to know what hay looks like. For example, both NASA and AARO know the range of speed and accelerations that can be achieved by current military and civilian aircraft, drones and balloons. Anything that can be identified as deviating from these ranges is scientifically interesting. So far, the vast majority of detected UAP have, on investigation, turned out to have prosaic explanations. But with the vast resources available to NASA and its partner agencies, there remains the possibility that convincing evidence could one day be captured. The NASA panel examined how cutting-edge scientific analysis techniques currently in production could be harnessed to identify needles in vast haystacks. Already, artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning (ML) have proved themselves as powerful tools to analyse complex datasets of the type produced by satellites and radar systems. They also plan to invite the public to contribute by using crowdsourcing techniques to gather images, data and other sensor metadata from smartphones as sightings occur. The panel felt this would help overcome the lack of any standardised system for ordinary folk to report their sightings in real time. But this idea is fraught with dangers: experience has shown that earlier appeals have led to authorities being overwhelmed by poor quality information. In 2009, the UK MoD decided to close their telephone hotline after it was inundated with reports of Chinese lanterns. The hotline had been set up in 1997 in response to an earlier wave of public and media interest that followed the 50th anniversary of the UFO mystery.

Possibly the most fruitful suggestion from the panel, in terms of information gathering, relates to the threat posed by UAP to airspace safety. Numerous examples of close shaves and 'nearmiss' (in aviation parlance) have been reported by both military and civilian aircrew in the recent past. NASA runs the Aviation Safety Reporting System (ASRS) for the Federal Aviation Authority that provides a voluntary reporting channel for pilots, air traffic controllers and others. The ASRS logs around 100,000 incidents each year. Although it is not designed to collect UAP data, NASA could use their access to this data to identify anomalies in real time.



STEPHANE VETTER

TOP: One of NASA's striking weather balloons. **LEFT:** Red sprites, a type of lightning flash that occurs above the troposphere.

traterrestrial in origin." Nevertheless, as some UAP indeed remain unidentified, they "are still interesting". This marks a welcome sea-change in NASA policy, as the report admits that previously "many scientists and aviators considered the study of UAP to be 'fringe' at best". That stigma remains today, with at least one panel member receiving hate mail from colleagues due to their membership of the study team and others being ridiculed and criticised on social media. Another manifestation of NASA's nervousness was the farcical decision to withhold the name of their newly-appointed director of UAP research, Mark McInerney, on the grounds that he might be subject to harassment. Yet later the same day, after media pointed to NASA's commitment to openness and transparency, Mr Inerneny's identity was announced in an updated NASA press release. [5]

Government investigations have always been responsive to peaks in public interest and the agendas of politicians and media celebrities. The current UFO revival has been fuelled by social media and the UFO celebrity circuit since 2017, when *The New York Times* revealed the existence of a secret Pentagon taskforce (**FT363:28** and passim). The release of film footage showing UAP recorded by US Navy personnel has kept the snowball rolling and provided hard evidence that was hitherto absent. In the past, the media lost interest when promised evidence failed to materialise and the novelty wore off. The recent unprecedented congressional interest in UAP is no exception, but what is unusual is how long the media and public fascination has continued. For the first time, this interest has drawn reluctant scientists into the fray. As John Lennon, who famously saw a UFO (or advertising plane), opined: "There's UFOs over New York and I ain't too surprised." Strange days indeed!

NOTES

1 Just after the NASA panel convened the National Defense Authorisation Act (NDAA) changed the 'A' in UAP from 'aerial' to 'anomalous' to include unidentified phenomena detected beneath or exiting the world's oceans. But NASA feel their expertise is best focused upon aerial mysteries.

2 Gillmor, Duncan (ed.), *The Scientific Study of Unidentified Flying Objects,* University of Colorado, 1969.

3 Guardian, 8 Nov 2011; https://petitions.obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/petition/formally-acknowledge-extraterrestrial-presence-engaging-human-race-disclosure/

4 *NASA Unidentified Anomalous Phenomena: Independent Study Team Report*, 2023, p.28

5 "Update: NASA shares UAP Independent Study Report; names director", Press Release, 14 Sept 2023: www.nasa.gov/news-release/update-nasa-shares-uap-independent-study-report-names-director/

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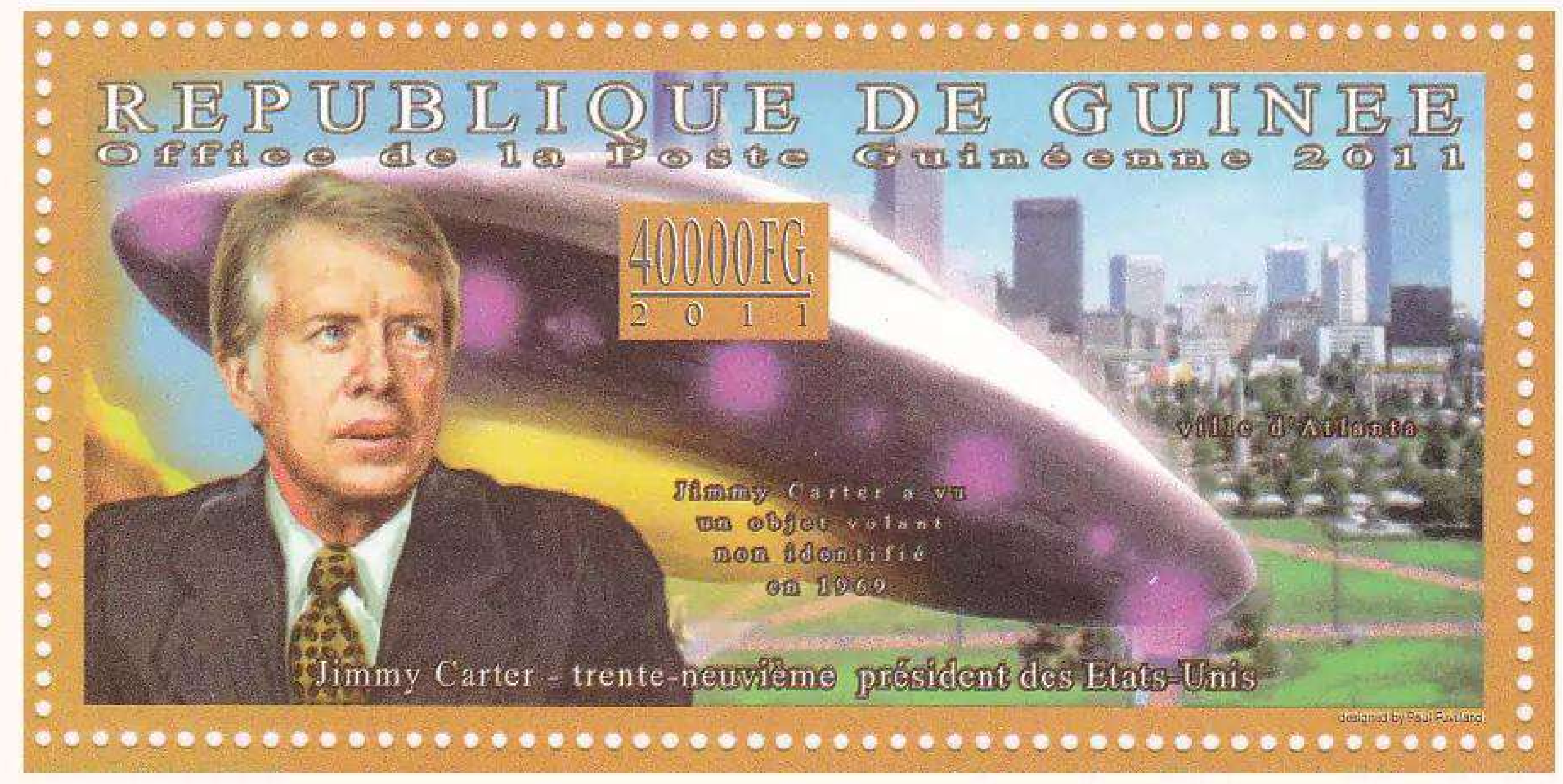
FRAUGHT WITH PERILS

JIMMY CARTER AND NASA'S LAST ATTEMPT TO 'STUDY' UFOS


REPUBLIQUE DE GUINEE
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Jimmy Carter a vu un objet volant non identifié en 1969
Jimmy Carter - trente-neuvième président des Etats-Unis

LEFT: President Carter's UFO encounter immortalised on a 2011 stamp from Guinea.

A number of US Presidents have expressed an interest in UFOs and extraterrestrials but only one has ever reported a sighting: Jimmy Carter. The 39th President held office from 1977 until 1981 during a period of intense public interest in UFOs. Soon after Carter took office Sir Eric Gairy, President of the small Caribbean island republic of Grenada, called upon the United Nations General Assembly to make 1978 "the year of the UFO" (see **FT428:50-53**). His attempts failed to gain any traction, but the release of Steven Spielberg's blockbuster movie *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* – with its plot based around a government conspiracy to hide direct contact with friendly ETs – raised the political stakes. During the election campaign in 1976 Carter said: "One thing's for sure. I'll never make fun of people who say they have seen unidentified objects in the sky. If I become President, I'll make every piece of information this country has about UFO sightings available to the government and the scientists." [1] Carter's interest was a direct result of his own experience in 1969, two years before he became Governor of Georgia. On the evening of 6 January he was preparing to speak in the town of Leary when one of the guests drew his attention to a bright white light, 30 degrees above the horizon, to the west of their position. As he and a dozen others watched, the light appeared to move towards them and hover behind a belt of pine trees. It changed colour from blue to red and then back to white. Eventually, the light, which he compared to the size of the full Moon, disappeared into the distance. Carter later filled out a NICAP UFO sighting questionnaire, but his story only emerged in 1976 when he told the *National Enquirer*, "It was the darndest thing I've ever seen… none of us could figure out what it was." [2]

Six months after he became President, Carter instructed his science advisor Dr Frank Press to ask NASA to evaluate whether it was time for the US Government to launch a new UFO investigation. The letter, dated 21 June 1977, avoided reference to the President's personal interest, but said the White House "is becoming a focal point for an increasing number of inquiries about UFOs". He suggested that NASA was ideally qualified to establish "a small panel of inquiry" to examine any new evidence that had emerged since the Condon Report. The White House said the spike in public interest was "a public relations problem as much as anything else" and suggested that high-profile scientists such as Carl Sagan, who had expressed interest in UFOs, should be invited to join the panel.

In stark contrast to the President, in 1977 NASA successfully resisted political pressure to dive into the UFO 'problem'. The White House's overture landed on the desk of NASA administrator Dr Robert Frosch, who responded to say any panel of inquiry "would require some additional resources… and for follow-on activity" and the agency had to satisfy itself that such expenditure was warranted. Unlike the existing independent panel, Frosch suggested that NASA might appoint a project officer to review unexplained reports received since the closure of Project Blue Book. But in December of that year he wrote again, stating bluntly that after giving "considerable thought" to the proposal NASA had decided to "take no steps to establish a research activity in this area [UFOs] or to convene a symposium on the subject". The reason? "There is an absence of tangible or physical evidence available for a thorough laboratory analysis," he wrote. "And because of the absence of evidence, we have not been able to devise a sound scientific procedure for investigating these phenomena." To embark on a research project without a clear methodology would, he said, be "wasteful and unproductive".

Astrophysicist Richard Henry described Frosch's letter as "remarkable". [3] Henry was employed by NASA when Press's letter arrived and engaged with the internal debate that led Frosch to stamp on Carter's proposal. Despite his access to what he calls "the secret NASA UFO file", Henry revealed that he could not explain how and why the decision was made. But he pointed to a line in an internal exchange that bemoaned not only the lack of hard evidence but also "the plethora of secondary source material" that relied on human observations. It also referred to other "problems" defined as: "the probability of hoaxes, the delicate interface of the Government with any private individual reporting an incident, and the danger of projecting an inaccurate NASA image". All these things meant that "undertaking a formal study… appears fraught with perils".

In his formal response to the White House Frosch was keen to point out that NASA retained an open mind and was willing to examine any bona fide physical evidence it received in future from "credible sources".

Significantly, NASA's Information Sheet on UFOs, released in early 1978, refers directly to President Carter's UFO sighting, which was listed as 'unidentified' by the civilian UFO group NICAP. [4] NASA coyly noted that "some students of aerial phenomena" were confident there was a simple explanation for the President's close encounter. In fact, an exhaustive investigation by sceptic Bob Sheaffer led him to discover that the true date and time of the sighting differed from the original news reports that implied it had occurred in 1973. When Sheaffer computed the positions of the planets in January 1969 he found that Venus "was a conspicuous evening star" in the cold, clear sky. The planet often nicknamed "the queen of UFOs" was nearing its "maximum brilliance" in the southwest at 7.15 pm, at 25 degrees elevation, "in virtually the exact position that Carter reported his UFO". [5] Sheaffer notes that despite providing this satisfying explanation, numerous media and TV programmes continue to uncritically repeat the claim that "Jimmy Carter has seen a UFO". As British UFO author Tim Good pointed out, the President of the USA is (or at that time was) a credible witness par excellence and "as a graduate of nuclear physics who served on US Navy nuclear submarines, Carter would not have been fooled by anything so prosaic as Venus." [6]

NOTES

1 *Daily Telegraph*, 2 June 1976.

2 *National Enquirer* (Lantana, Florida), 8 June 1976.

3 Richard C Henry, 'UFOs and NASA', *Journal of Scientific Exploration* 2/2 (1988).

4 NASA Information Sheet 78-1, 'Unidentified Flying Objects', 1 Feb 1978

5 Robert Sheaffer, *The UFO Verdict*, Prometheus Books, 1981.

6 Tim Good, *Beyond Top Secret*, Sidgwick and Jackson, 1996.

IN THE FIRST OF A SERIES OF INTERVIEWS WITH PROMINENT FORTEAN FIGURES, GORDON RUTTER TALKS TO CRYPTOZOOLOGIST AT LARGE RICHARD FREEMAN

GORDON RUTTER

Richard Freeman will be familiar to most readers of *Fortean Times*. Over the years, many of us will have enjoyed his reports of expeditions or we may have been lucky enough to witness one of his enthusiastic presentations. One thing to know about Richard is he is not an armchair cryptozoologist. He visits the countries, he interviews the witnesses and he searches for the beasts. In this interview we get an insight into what drives a working cryptozoologist and how Richard's cryptozoological career developed.

AOVE: Richard Freeman peers out from behind a Giant Redwood in search of Bigfoot – which he is not going to find as he is in Edinburgh's Royal Botanic Garden. **LEFT**: Giant maggots from the Pertwee-era *Doctor Who* story "The Green Death" provided early inspiration for the budding cryptozoologist"

FROM DOCTOR WHO TO CFZ

But what first got him started on this path? For this question, which he admits he is often asked, he has a stock answer: "Classic *Doctor Who*." He goes on to elaborate. "Not the modern toss, and I hate Jodie Whitaker". So strong is his dislike, in fact, that not only has he stopped watching *Doctor Who*, but he has stopped watching the BBC altogether. Richard is of an age where he saw the Jon Pertwee episodes on their original broadcast. One of the things that first fired the imagination of the young proto-fortean Richard was the fact that “the third Doctor was incarcerated on Earth by the Timelords. So all of the monsters he fought were here on Earth. And it was all the more frightening when the monsters were on your doorstep. Giant maggots slithering out of holes… intelligent marine dinosaurs rearing up out of the sea… Lovecraftian aliens… and that got me interested in monsters and strange creatures.” We can see some of the fortean themes in that snapshot, but some stories were even more explicit about their cryptozoological background. “In some of the stories, the Doctor battled things like the Loch Ness Monster and the Yeti. At the same time, I was fascinated by zoology, by wildlife… and David Attenborough in *Life on Earth*. Along with Jon Pertwee, he is one of my heroes. All that got me interested in strange creatures… and when I read the story of St George and the Dragon I was always on the side of the Dragon.”

These interests spilled over into Richard’s school life, and in careers interviews he told them he wanted to be a zookeeper. The stock answer he was given was that that was an impossible career choice. Richard was not impressed with this attitude (how horrible it is not to encourage children in their interests), so he ignored them and went out and got a job as a zookeeper, eventually becoming head of reptiles at Twycross Zoo, a job he did for several years. After being told he couldn’t be a cryptozoologist, he went out and became one. After being told he couldn’t be an author, he went out and became one. There is a pattern emerging here. One thing no one told him he couldn’t do was be a grave digger – and he did a stint as one too! But how exactly did he become a cryptozoologist?

“While hunting for the Beast of Bodmin Moor and other British big cats, I went to Jamaica Inn where they had the now sadly defunct Potter’s Museum of Curiosities. In the shop, they had this little magazine called *Animals and Men*, which wasn’t as rude as it sounds. It was about cryptozoology and it was produced by this outfit called The Centre For Fortean Zoology (CFZ). I enjoyed it so much that I subscribed and joined up; and then I started writing letters and articles and went to conventions, where I met Jon Downes [the founder of the CFZ]. He said: ‘When you finish at university – I was studying zoology at Leeds University at the time – come and be our zoological director.’ He told me that he lived in a place called Holne Court. I thought he was this eccentric member of the landed gentry, a bit like Lord Bath, and that Holne Court was a mansion with rambling libraries with ladders to get up to the books and great leather chairs and those globes of the world you open up with liquor inside them, and all sorts of eccentric characters there. I thought, alright, get my boots in under the table and become friends with a millionaire… I was right about the eccentric characters, but I was wrong about everything else – because Holne Court was a housing estate and Jon lived in a two-up-two-down hovel that owed more to *The Young Ones* than it did to *The X-Files*… Nowadays. he lives in a large cottage on the North Downs, but back in the early days it wasn’t the mansion that I imagined”.

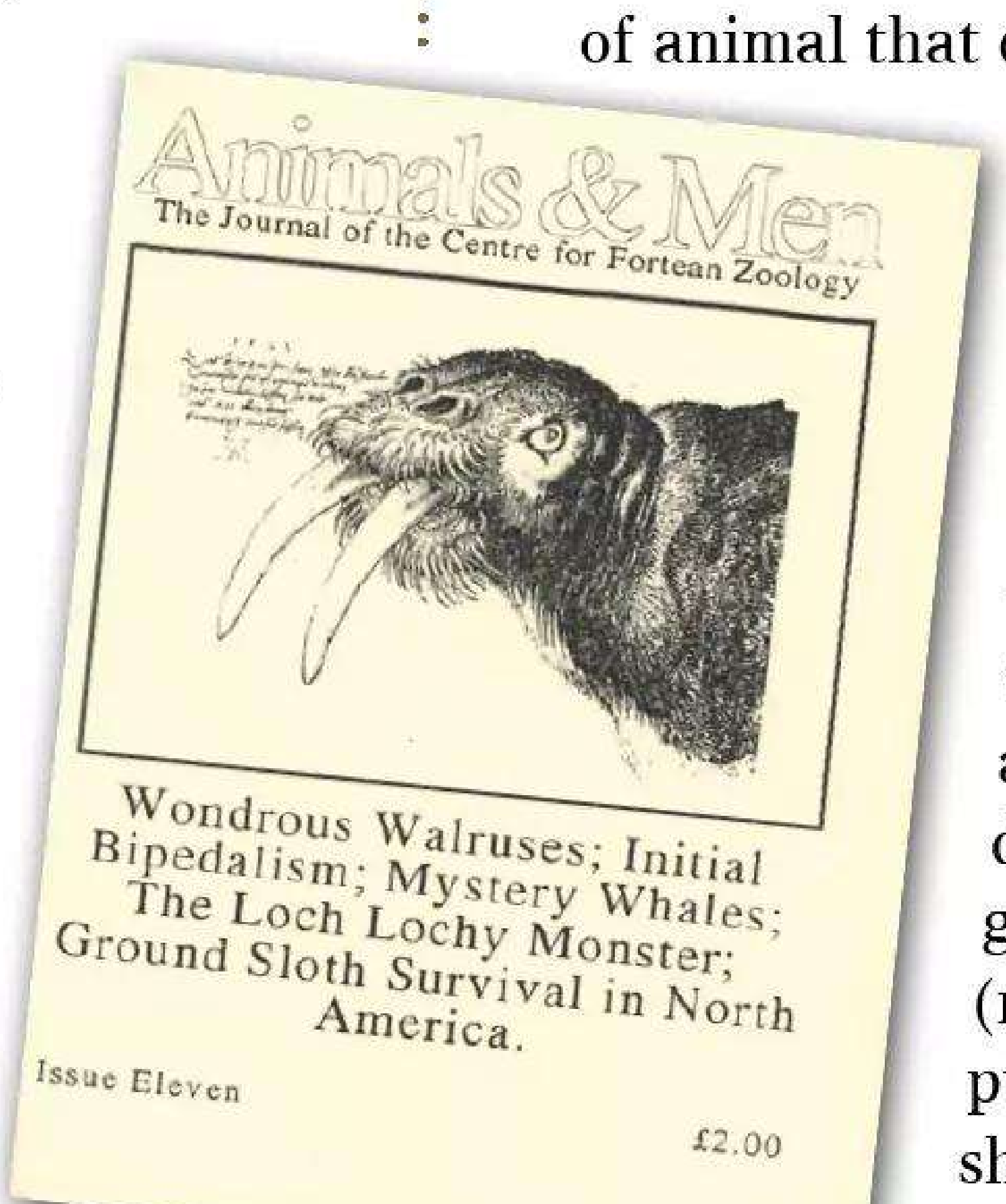
“WE DID A LOT OF BIG CAT STUFF IN THE SOUTHWEST, BUT ONE OF THE STRANGEST CASES WAS THAT OF THE PHANTOM WALLABY SLASHER OF CLEVELAND”

So Richard became the Zoological Director of the CFZ. Since then he has been hunting creatures around the world, visiting every continent except Antarctica.

OWLMEN AND DRAGONS

From the mid-1990s, Richard was living in Jon Downes’s spare room at Holne Court and this was where the international expeditions started. His first foray was in search of the Naga in the Mekong River in Thailand (**FT166:30-35**). But these overseas trips did not stop the UK-based research.

“We did a lot of big cat stuff in the Southwest, but one of the strangest cases was that of the phantom wallaby slasher of Cleveland. There was a place called The Hope Animal Sanctuary and it was run by a chap called Cliff Spedding. We spoke to him on the phone, and he told us that a couple of his wallabies had been killed. He sounded like a dear sweet man and he was genuinely upset about his wallabies, so we decided we were going to go up and investigate.” And investigate they did, with a TV crew and a group of 18-30 year olds who were being filmed investigating all aspects of the paranormal world. “Spedding looked like a cross between Big Daddy, the wrestler, and Eminem in shorts and wellies with a string vest and a ponytail,” says Richard. The CFZ teamed up with a local vet, an autopsy was performed on one of the wallabies and it was found that the animal “had been killed by being hit on the head and then by beheading; but it had been alive when it was beheaded – so it wasn’t a big cat or any kind of animal that did it. A person had done it for some reason, we concluded. We also got involved with the police up there at the same time and the police were genuinely grateful that we were having a look at this and doing something about it.” The police discussed some potential groups or individuals (many of who would have put Royston Vasey to shame). “We never did get to the bottom of who the hell did this and why, but it was one of the strangest investigations we ever did. I mean I’ve had some strange jobs, but that was a very, very weird one”.



Animals & Men

The Journal of the Centre for Fortean Zoology

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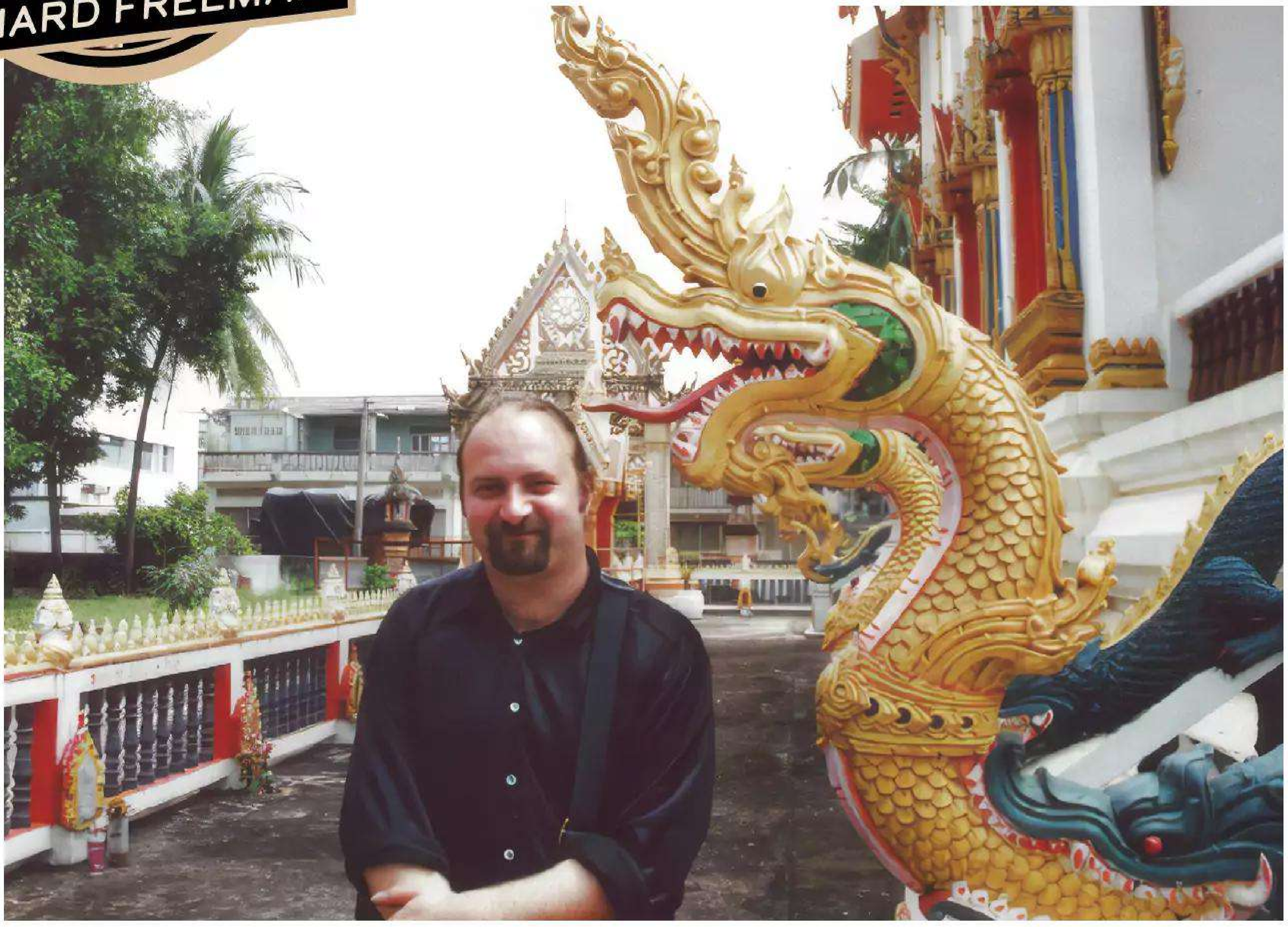
“We went looking for things like Mor-

JONATHAN DOWNES

ABOVE: The legendary Anthony ‘Doc’ Shiels (left) and Centre for Fortean Zoology founder Jon Downes.

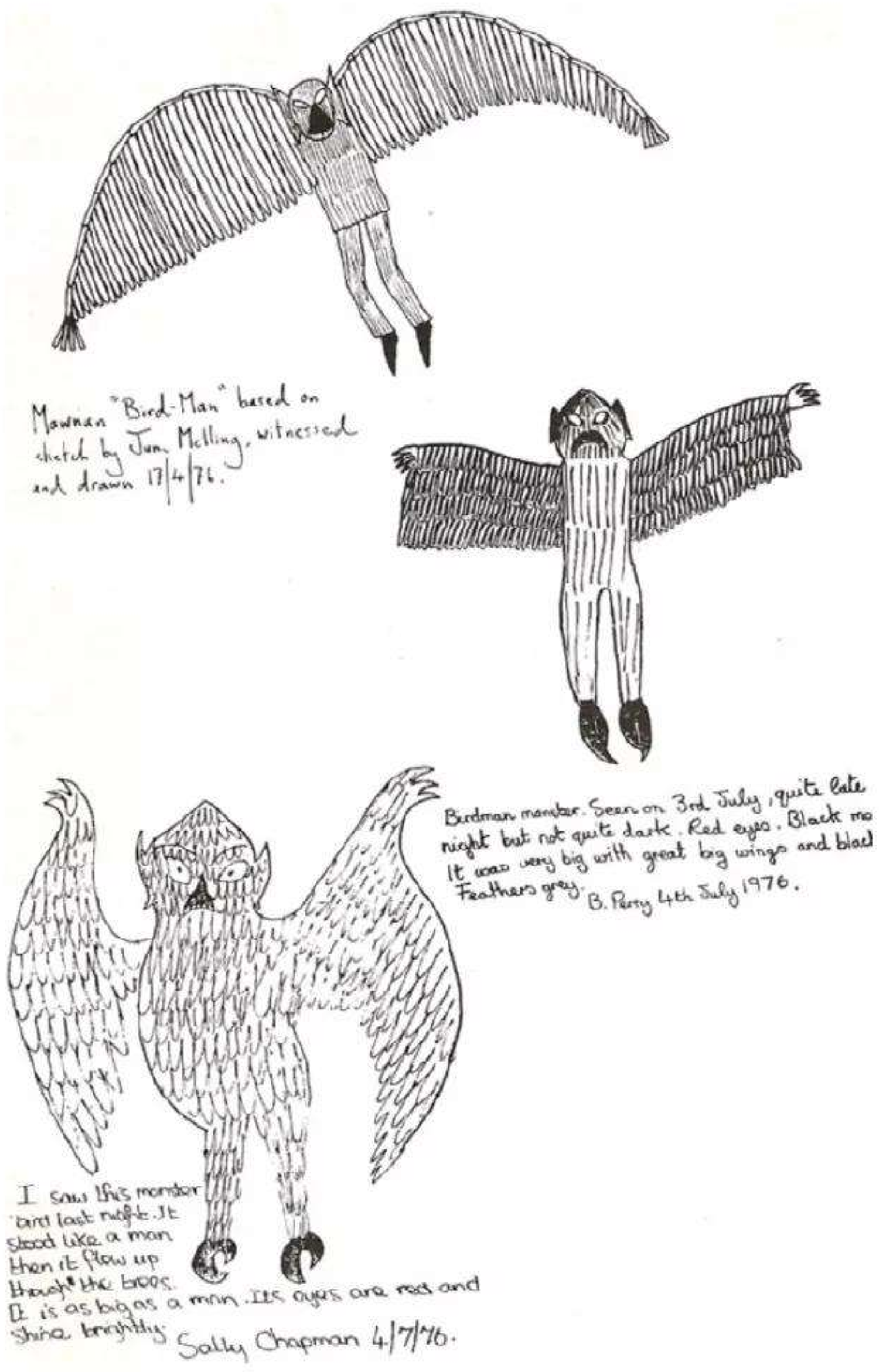


LEFT: A younger Richard in search of Thailand's naga in 2002. **BELOW**: Witness sketches of the Cornish Owlman – defiitely at what Richard calls "the weird end" of cryptozoology.

gawr (**FT162:7**) and the Cornish Owlman (**FT17:17, 62:52, 200:28**), which is very similar to the Mothman of Point Pleasant. Similar things have been seen around the world – it's one of these winged entities that are part of the global monster template, but it's obviously not a flesh-and-blood animal. If there was an owl that big, it would have been found hundreds of years ago. But I know someone who saw it. I thought initially that people were mistaking the European eagle owl, which can be six feet across the wings and they take down things like wild cats and foxes and stuff. They're rare in Britain, but they do occur, and I thought maybe the initial witnesses, who were all young girls, had seen this big owl and exaggerated it through fear. But I talked to one of the later witnesses, now a highly respected scientist… I spoke to him at length about it, and it still frightens him all these years on and he says that there's no way it was an owl – he describes it as this demonic thing with a gaping mouth where the beak should be, great glowing eyes, claws on the wings, pincers on the talons." The witness and his girlfriend felt that the thing had pursued them home. "They were on holiday in Cornwall when they saw it. They believed it was lurking in the woods near the house and looking up at him in his bedroom window, and he was having nightmares about it. They both believe they glimpsed stuff on their way to school and things like that – so you see, it haunted them for years, and it still haunts them."

I asked Richard about this, an investigation into an apparently non-physical entity. Did he feel, as a cryptozoologist, that it was his job to include these entities, or did he lose interest in them once he saw that they were not corporeal?

> "HE DESCRIBES IT AS THIS DEMONIC THING WITH A GAPING MOUTH WHERE THE BEAK SHOULD BE, WITH GREAT GLOWING EYES AND CLAWS ON THE WINGS"



Mawnan "Bird-Man" based on sketch by Jan Melling, witnessed and drawn 17/4/76.

Birdman monster. Seen on 3rd July, quite late night but not quite dark. Red eyes. Black mo It was very big with great big wings and blacl Feathers grey. B. Perry 4th July 1976.

I saw this monster and last night. It stood like a man then it flew up though the trees. It is as big as a man. Its eyes are red and shine brightly. Sally Chapman 4/7/76.

"Well a Centre for Fortean Zoology encompasses cryptozoology and the stranger things. Painting with the broadest brush strokes, monsters fall into two categories. Ones that are simply unknown animals – they might be big and scary looking, but they're flesh-and-blood creatures. In this class, I'd put things like the Orang Pendek, Yeti, Giant Anaconda – things like that – and things that are classed as extinct, but are probably still around, like the Tasmanian Wolf. That would come under the remit of what I call 'straight' cryptozoology. And at the weird end of it you get stuff like Mothman and Owlman and sightings of Bigfoot-like creatures alongside UFOs and poltergeist outbreaks and other fortean phenomena."

We had a quick discussion about dragon sightings that had been reported relativity recently. "People report them. People report them coming through from another plane of reality, or they are somehow subconscious and sort of a gestalt tulpa or thought form. The tulpa becomes physically real for a while. My theory about these things – Mothman, Owlman – and strange things like black dogs that still get reported today… I've got to thinking that all over you get the same types of monster: it's almost as if they're scripted and cultural. On Earth you get giants, trolls, Yeti, Bigfoot. You get little people – goblins, elves, the Wendigo. Call them what you will. You get monstrous dogs, werewolves, demonic black dogs, things like that, monstrous cats and birds. If you go back a couple of million years to our ancestors coming down out of the jungle, with changing climate and expanding ice-lands… They were finding new predators, so you got things like crocodiles and pythons preying on them, lions and leopards, African hunting dogs, raptors, competition with other primates. So it's almost as if, culturally, these monsters are tied to what our ancestors would have feared. I believe that they somehow survived as fossil memories in the collective unconscious of mankind and under the right set of circumstances they manifest. They become physically real for a while. Now that's not to say there are no flesh-and-blood cryptids. The Orang Pendek obviously is an animal and I think the Yeti is – and some of the Sasquatch sightings are flesh-and-blood animals... So I think the weird side of monsters has something to do with our collective unconscious and maybe something to do with things that can move from one state of reality or one dimension to another."

Does he prefer the potentially real creatures to the more fantastic ones?

"I'm utterly fascinated by dragons. The

GORDON RUTTER

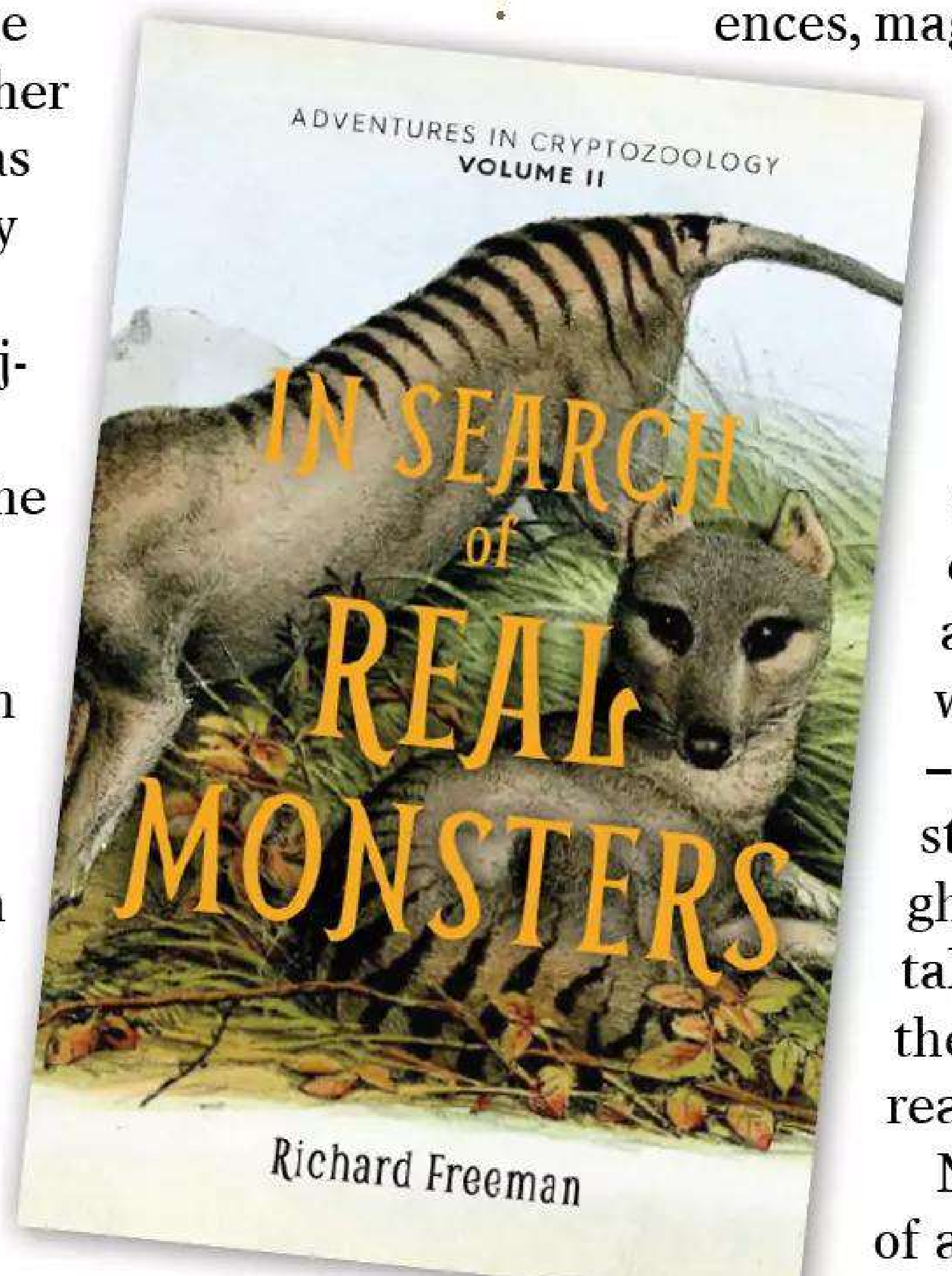
ABOVE: The dragon-fancying Mr Freeman finds a cockatrice disguised as the logo for a takeaway in Stockbridge, Edinburgh. **BELOW**: One of Richard's many books.

dragon is my favourite – the king of the monsters. Forget about demons and vampires and werewolves and zombies, all overused in modern horror, because the dragon predates all of them. It's in every culture on Earth, going back 40,000 years... it is so international and so ancient. It got its teeth and claws into the psyche of mankind very deeply and it goes back further than any other monster. So they fascinate me, but apart from that, yes, I find the flesh-and-blood animals more interesting because of my zoological background and because of the potential of being able to actually find them, prove their existence and get them protected."

CARRY ON CAMPING

We then chatted about the cryptids most likely to exist, with Richard putting the Tasmanian Wolf at the top of the list. He spoke about some of his journeys searching for it and the many witnesses that he has interviewed. Richard's excitement about the use of eDNA studies, trail cameras and predictive models of distribution is infectious. But like many projects there are two main issues for Richard's fieldwork and potential discoveries: Time and money.

"I've been to Tasmania three times now, and we're back to Sumatra looking for Orang Pendek for our sixth time (**FT182:32-39, 208:30-34, 266:50-53, 432:44-48**), so you don't do something once and give up on it – you keep going back and you need to spend a long time in the field. In general, we can only afford to do two to four weeks in the field at the moment. If I could, I'd be spending months in the field and I'd be paying other people to be in the field as well. In case there are any millionaires reading this who are looking for a project to fund..."



But in case you think the life of a cryptozoologist is overly glamorous, then think of some of the down sides. "I've been stalked by a tiger, attacked by a cobra, almost fallen down a cliff, been covered in leeches. I've encountered mosquitoes, I've had diarrhoea during a sandstorm in Mongolia, I've had ticks all over me. In Tajikistan, looking for the gul which is a relic homonym quite distinct from the almasty (**FT373:38-43**) we all got violent amoebic dysentery, which lasted for five weeks. So these are not expensive foreign holidays – it's a hard slog. And I hate camping. I loathe camping. Why anybody would camp for pleasure is utterly beyond me. It's appalling. I hate it. I do it because I have to."

After an expedition, the work needs to be communicated, through talks, conferences, magazine articles and books.

"I have a new book coming out called *The Highest Strangeness*, so we're looking at monsters, ghosts, UFOs and miscellaneous entities. Really strange stuff. It's the first time I've ever written about ghosts and UFOs – generally I just write about cryptozoology – but we're looking at really strange things like giant ghost crabs, phantom trees, talking cats, robot flowers, the exorcism of Loch Ness... really, really weird stuff."

Nobody ever said the life of a practising cryptozoologist was dull and Richard Freeman, Zoological Director of the CFZ, is living proof of that.

GORDON RUTTER is a regular contributor to FT and the founder of the Edinburgh Fortean Society.

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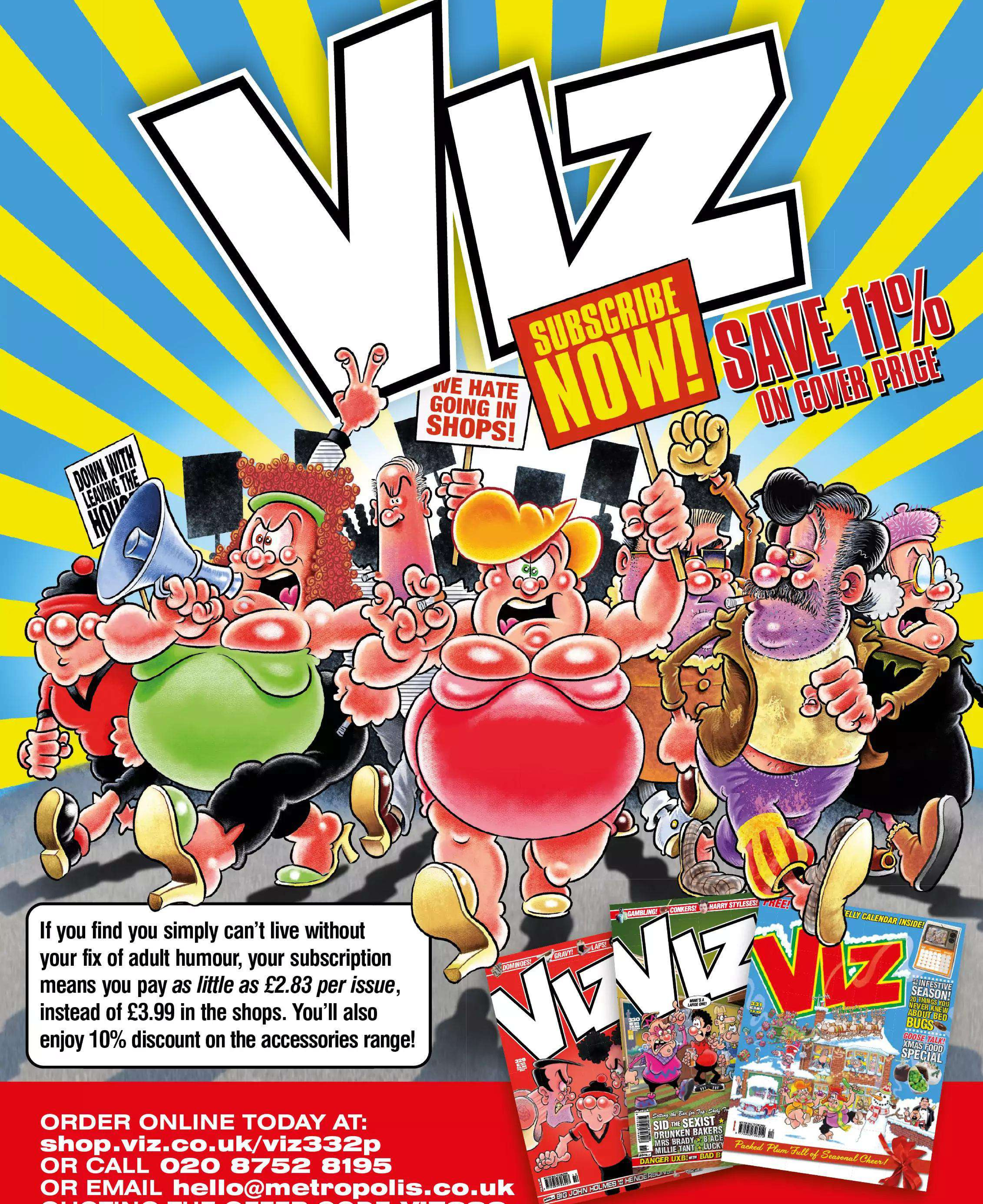
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The APRO files: 'lost' and found

PHILIP MANTLE greets a Holy Grail of ufology as the APRO archive finds a new home after years in the shadows

ABOVE LEFT: Jim and Coral Lorenzen. **ABOVE RIGHT**: Brian Myers (left) and David Marler with the APRO files safely in place.

One of the largest UFO archives in the world had been hidden away in Arizona, USA, for decades, with many UFO researchers fearing that it might have been 'lost' forever. APRO (the Aerial Phenomena Research Organisation) was one of the early pioneering UFO groups, and thousands of files were contained in its long-unseen archive. Numerous UFO researchers had tried to gain access to these files, myself included, but all to no avail.

APRO's was considered one of the best UFO archives in the USA, alongside those assembled by NICAP (National Investigations Committee on Aerial Phenomena) and CUFOS (Center for UFO Studies). APRO was founded in 1952 by husband-and-wife Jim and Coral Lorenzen, who also co-authored several books on UFOs.

For years, the archive grew larger and larger and contained witness reports, photographs, and original correspondence from ufologists not just in the US, but all around the world. The archives were located in Tucson, Arizona, where the Lorenzens lived for many years. After they passed away, and with ufological politics playing a part (I'll not bore you with the details), the APRO files ended up in the care of Tina Choate and Brian Myers. It was estimated that the archive contained some 15,000 files, plus boxes of other material – but nobody knew for sure.

When I began working on the 1973 Pascagoula alien abduction case I knew that APRO had sent the late Dr James Harder to Pascagoula to investigate; he even hypnotised both of the famous abductees, Charles Hickson and Calvin Parker. I'm not sure who told me that Tina and Brian were custodians of the APRO files, but I contacted them to ask if they could help me locate any of Dr Harder's work on the Pascagoula case. They were both very polite, but apart from a radio interview with Charles Hickson I was unable to obtain anything else.

It was estimated that the archive contained some 15,000 files

This was frustrating, but there was nothing I could do about it. By this point it was clear to me that the APRO files were not 'lost', but if the archive was as large as many people believed it to be, and not indexed in any way, then it could take weeks of searching to locate anything of interest. I could understand why I was not granted access at that time. Sadly, Tina died a few years ago, but Brian kept in touch.

In 2023 I donated my files to the National UFO Historical Records Center (nufohrc.org/) in Albuquerque, New Mexico (see **FT432:51**). I had suggested to Brian Myers that he might like to do the same with the APRO files.

Then, on 28 November 2023, a press release from David Marler, the Executive Director of NUFOHRC, took the UFO community completely by surprise:

The Aerial Phenomena Research Organization (APRO) was one of the oldest and largest civilian UFO research organisations in the world. The research files of this organisation have been transferred to the National UFO Historical Records Center (NUFOHRC) in Rio Rancho, NM.

Dr J Allen Hynek, former Scientific Adviser to US Air Force Project Blue Book, cited APRO and NICAP (National Investigations Committee on Aerial Phenomena) as the best civilian UFO groups of their time. Both of these collections of UFO archival records, along with the files of the Center for UFO Studies (CUFOS), are now housed at the headquarters of NUFOHRC.

All of these records are in the process of being digitised for electronic storage, analysis, transfer and ease of access.

The collective files of APRO, NICAP, CUFOS, as well as Dr J Allen Hynek's original US Air Force Project Blue Book files, constitute the largest civilian historical UFO case file collection in the United States, if not the world.

An appropriate site is being sought in the Albuquerque, NM, area for a permanent facility to house this massive collection of UFO research data.

The facility will allow for public access to the UFO data as well as viewing of historic photos and artefacts from the UFO research field. NUFOHRC plans to cooperate with civilian, scientific, and governmental UFO research efforts.

Never in US history has such a vast quantity of UFO records (numbering in the tens of thousands) been centralized in one location.

For me, the APRO files are a Holy Grail of civilian UFO research and this is one of the highlights in ufology this year. Apparently, the acquisition of the files went very smoothly and was organised very quickly in early November by Brian Myers and David Marler, and the NUFOHRC now legally owns the APRO archives. From what I can gather, there are 15 filing cabinets full of material, plus various boxes and miscellaneous items in the collection. Marler and his colleagues have received plaudits for this feat, and rightly so; and well done also to Brian Myers for donating the archive – it can't have been an easy thing to do after all these years.

It will, of course, take David Marler and his team quite some time to carefully make their way through the APRO files and document exactly what is in them. I personally expect some real gems of data will emerge – maybe even some of Dr Harder's work on the Pascagoula abduction...

PHILIP MANTLE is a longstanding UFO researcher and author. He was formerly Director of Investigations for the British UFO Research Association and the MUFON Representative for England.

Dracula on telly: 1968

JON DEAR kicks off an occasional series on TV adaptations of Stoker's *Dracula* with 1968's *Mystery and Imagination*

LEFT: Denholm Elliott was an odd choice to play the Count. **BELOW**: Susan George's Lucy is this adaptation's stand-out.

It's over three years since the UK went into Covid-induced lockdown, and while we all sat at home and tried to remember the last time we'd gone so long without setting foot in a pub, we also marvelled at how quickly people adapted to the new normal. We wondered if things would ever truly return to how they were, or if they even should. The pandemic changed not only our perceptions of the world and how it functioned, but also how we experienced things. One unexpected side effect of lockdown was that it invigorated self-curated event television, with actors and programme-makers getting involved in watch-alongs of James Bond films or episodes of *Doctor Who*. Television became what it hadn't been in years – a shared experience.

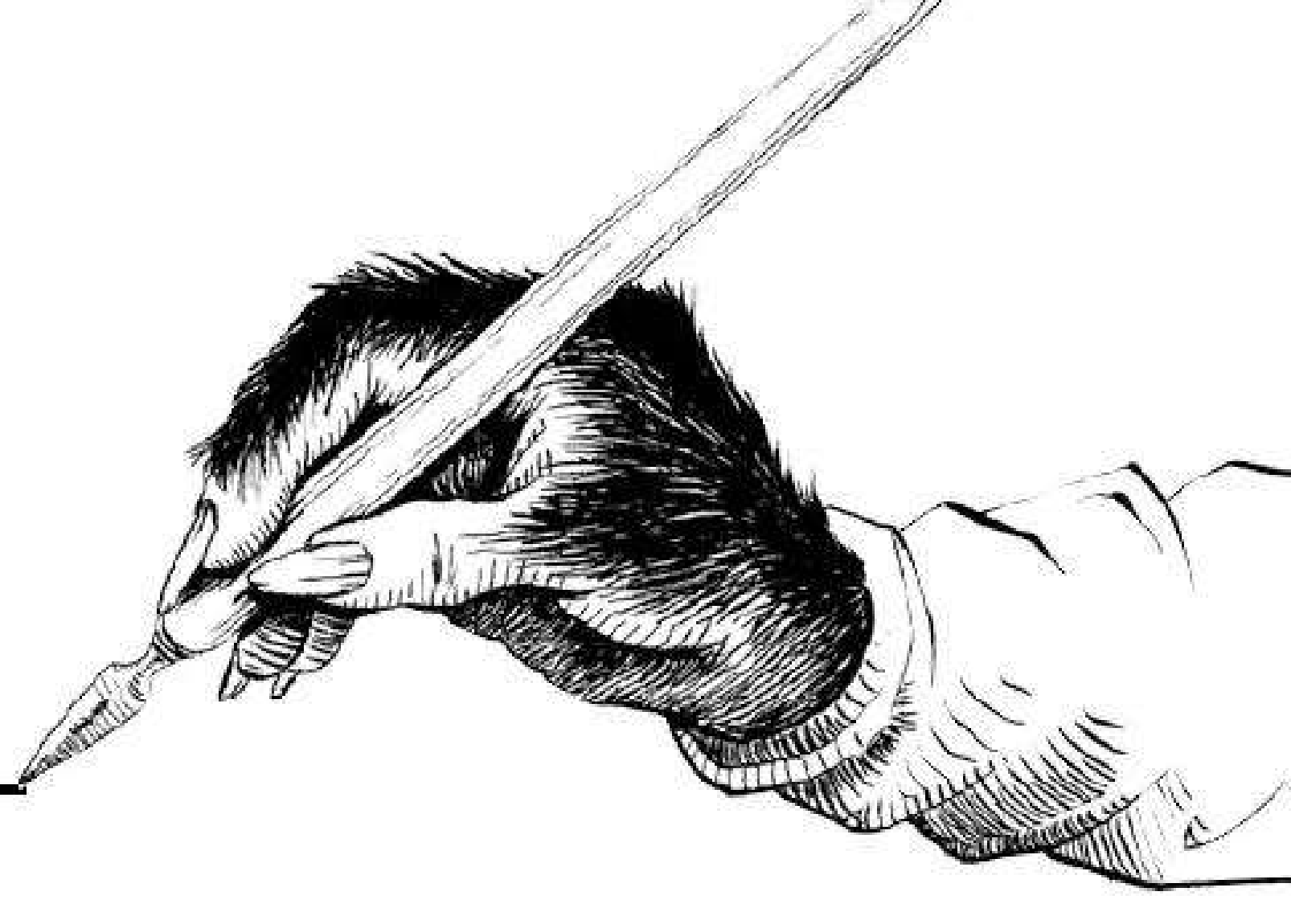
The context in which you watch something can matter almost as much as what you're watching. These days, with the accessibility of streaming services, the dividing line between home and cinema viewing has become ever more permeable, but back in 1968, with only three channels and Christopher Lee's third big screen outing as the Count about to be released by Hammer,[1] a made-for-telly *Dracula* looked like pretty special event television.[2] Now, you could enjoy all the gothic melodrama and sexual subtext from the comfort of your own sofa. You'd invited the vampire into your home.

Bookshelves groan with volumes dedicated to the Count's cinematic outings, but there's precious little looking at his exploits on television. And to be honest, that's not really too surprising given the relative paucity of small screen adaptations and the fact that for much of its history television lacked the capacity to tackle such an epic tale. So I thought it might be quite fun to examine some of the UK productions. What compromises and edits were made? Who was cast and what did they bring to the role of the legendary agent of infection and death?

> *For the most part, Dracula is a still point around which the other characters move*

The anthology series *Mystery and Imagination* began life with ABC television under highly experienced producer and director Jonathan Alwyn. It used some of the best writers and directors working in television at the time – including Robert Muller, Tony Robertson, Joan Kemp-Welch and John Bowen – and adapted the gothic short stories of writers such as Edgar Allen Poe, Robert Louis Stevenson, Margaret Oliphant and, for the first time in the UK, MR James.[3] This was always meant to be a prestige production. In order to inject some continuity into the series, the recurring character of Richard Beckett, from Sheridan Le Fanu's *The Room in the Flying Dragon*, was incorporated into each episode. The programme ran for three seasons between 1966 and 1968 before moving to Thames Television and a new format. The running time increased to 90 minutes (including adverts), but now there would only be three episodes per series. The longer running time gave the production team the opportunity to adapt full length novels, and this set-up resulted in two series, one in 1968 and another in 1970. *Dracula* was the last episode of the 1968 run, following *Frankenstein* the previous week (an adaptation notable for having Ian Holm play both Viktor and the creature). It was produced by the experienced Reginald Collin, directed by Patrick Dromgoole and written by Charles Graham, who had previously adapted LP Hartley's *Feet Foremost* for the series.

As the adaptation is essentially a play in three acts, we're limited in time and locations. Apart from a brief flashback sequence set in Dracula's castle in Transylvania, all the action is shifted to Whitby. And by Whitby, I mean the home of Dr Seward (James Maxwell) and the adjacent asylum where he works; the home of Lucy (Susan George) and her mum (Joan Hickson); and a graveyard. The only other place we see is a brief location sequence outside Dracula's new home, where Lucy goes to knock him up and discovers he's not in. And we discover he sleeps in the unconsecrated grave of a suicide rather than in the soil of his homeland for reasons that aren't made entirely clear. But then much is lost or truncated in this version, leaving a slightly unsatisfying feeling after viewing. In most versions, Lucy loses one of her suitors from the novel, but here we only have Seward, acting as the sceptical foil to Professor Van Helsing (Bernard Archard). In short, Seward's filling the Jonathan Harker role. So where's Harker? That's easy: he's busy being Renfield. And that makes sense, as Renfield's main function in the original tale is to illustrate Dracula's power and what could have befallen Harker. So if you're going to have Harker in the role of Dracula's victim, you don't really



need Renfield.

We're told that the apparently unknown Harker (Corin Redgrave) was the only survivor of the shipwreck of the *Demeter*. A babbling madman, it's only when Lucy's BFF Mina (Suzanne Neve) turns up and recognises him as her newly wedded husband that everyone else cottons on to his true identity. Weren't any of these people at the wedding?

We first meet Dracula (Denholm Elliott) tinkling the ivories at Seward's dinner party, before an escaping Harker bursts through the French windows, calling Dracula "master". The scene seems to have been lifted from Hammer's *The Revenge of Frankenstein* (Terence Fisher, 1958), where it also made a lot more sense, but here it's used as a way of introducing the title character and giving an excuse for an info dump about who everyone is.

For the most part, the character of Dracula is a background figure, a still point around which the other characters move while they try and guess his motives and work out how to overcome him. Unfortunately, no one seems able to work out exactly why he's doing what he's doing. We know Dracula kept Harker prisoner, but not why he also travelled on the *Demeter*; was it because he knew Harker was an inmate of Seward's asylum or that Lucy and Mina were friends? It's almost as if motive and intention are irrelevant here. Dracula is Dracula: he's going to overpower you and bite you, because that's what he does. You might as well ask the motivation of a virus.

Denholm Elliott seems a curious choice for the Count, displaying neither the silent power nor the animal magnetism required for the part. This could work if the programme-makers were playing against type, but they still seem intent on portraying Dracula as the cuckolding predator, which Elliot fails to convey, although at least he's helped by Lucy's fiancé Seward being as insipidly ineffectual as possible. Eliott had previously appeared in the *Mystery and Imagination* adaptation of Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher* (ATV, 1966).

LEFT: Denholm Elliott as Dracula, Susan George as Lucy, and some graveyard rats.

In the end, this adaptation belongs to Lucy, and Susan George is wonderful. Freed from the lazy slut-shaming the character normally endures, she displays agency, motivation and tragedy, and it's through her that the themes of the tale are most evident. This is hardly the only adaptation that ignores the class anxieties of the original, focusing instead on the corrupting infection of the foreign body. Dracula doesn't just steal your girlfriend by being sexier than you, he destroys your entire way of life in a manner you never saw coming and are powerless to prevent. This Godless creature wrecks marriages and encourages homosexual tendencies. Nowhere are the themes of *Dracula* as infection and sexual subversion more obvious than having Van Helsing perform a transfusion: Seward giving his blood to Lucy, blood that Dracula will then feed upon, seemingly causing Lucy to orgasm.

Dracula's bizarre decision to sleep in a grave in the nearby cemetery rather than his own home comes back to, well, bite him when Van Helsing compromises the grave, trapping Dracula in the open, where he pleads for his 'life' and makes ill-defined promises of power if spared. It doesn't feel right somehow: Dracula has left himself far too vulnerable, although the visual effects of his demise are quite well done.

There are a couple of nice moments in this underwhelming tale: the Castle flashback sequences are atmospherically shot and the three female vampires are effectively realised, and the decision to cast black actor Nina Baden-Semper suggests the Count has had a few international jaunts before this one. There's also a decent scene with Lucy and Mina in the graveyard with an old man who tells them about the suicide, and there's some creepy vision mixing as Dracula influences both Lucy and her mother to do his bidding. But ultimately there's no getting away from the fact that this is too big a tale told in too brief a way. It loses too much and must rely on awkward coincidences and unbelievable levels of ignorance from the characters. And I'm not sure what accent Bernard Archard is trying to do (I think it's German, but who knows?).

Dracula was recorded on 7 and 8 November at Teddington Studios and broadcast on the ITV channels less than two weeks later at 8.30pm on Monday, 18 November 1968. The *TV Times* gave the following synopsis:

> *The story of the Transylvanian count is certainly grisly. Like all vampires, Dracula is confined to a coffin by day. At night, he seeks his victims. When he visits the home of Dr Seward, Dracula is elegant and charming. Dr Seward becomes jealous about the effect the count is having on the lovely Lucy, but he has not begun to suspect what Dracula is planning. There will be no "sending up" tonight in this blood-curdling melodrama. Denholm Elliott, who plays Count Dracula said: "It would be ruinous to attempt anything of that sort. My approach will be as classical as possible, very Middle-European, very sinister – and I hope we'll scare everybody out of their wits!"*

Any othering of central Europeans would have meant something quite different in 1968 to what it would now: *Dracula* was made in the months following the Soviet Union's invasion of Czechoslovakia and Albania's subsequent withdrawal from the Warsaw Pact. Today, one imagines writers would be wary of comparing overseas visitors to infections. The fact that these themes still resonate, though, speaks to their universal nature. But it's important not to read too much into what is first and foremost entertainment.

Not that Julian Critchley writing in the *Times* was terribly entertained, referring to the programme as "Transylvanian nonsense". He was also apparently as bemused as I was regarding Van Helsing's accent.

So much for *Mystery and Imagination*. Next time, we'll look at Dan Curtis's 1973 adaptation and see what new elements this brought to the mythology. Will we have a slightly less surprising choice for the title role?

NOTES

1 *Dracula Has Risen From the Grave* (1968) was released in UK cinemas on 7 Nov 1968, while the *Mystery and Imagination* "Dracula" was in production

2 Although this was the first small screen adaptation in the UK, the US anthology series *Matinee Theater* had broadcast the first TV *Dracula* (with John Carradine in the title role) in 1956.

3 As with *Dracula*, the first MR James TV adaptation was a US one, *The Lost Will of Dr Rant* (based on "The Tractate Middoth") starring Leslie Nielsen in 1951.

JON DEAR is a television historian and has previously written about Nigel Kneale for *FT*. He is currently writing a book on the BBC's *Ghost Stories for Christmas*.

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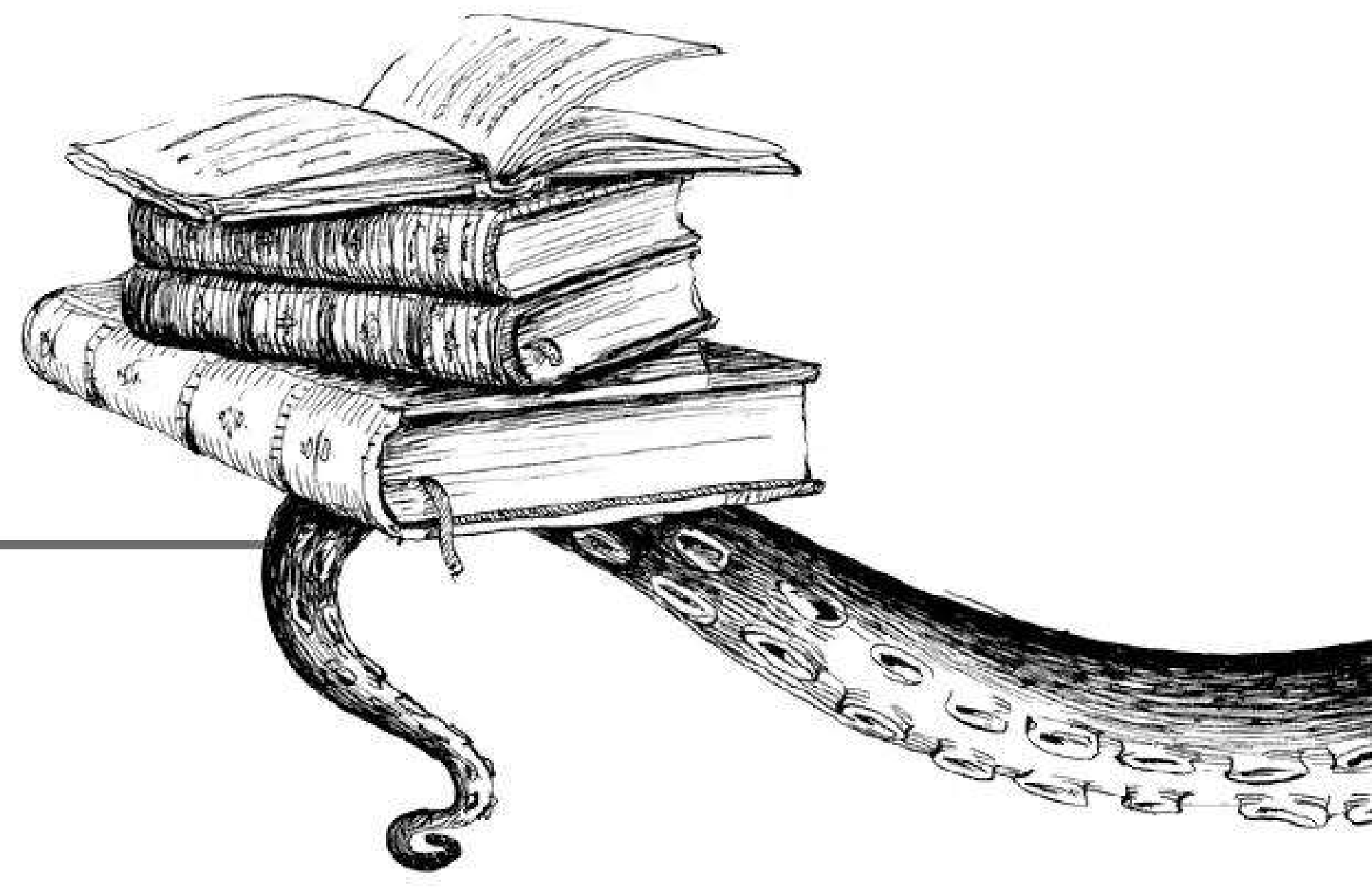


Saints above!

There are thousands of testimonies of people who saw other people hover or fly or suddenly materialise or vanish, and this is a professorial study of the phenomenon, says **Bob Rickard**

They Flew

A History of the Impossible

Carlos Eire

Yale University Pres 2023
Hb, 512pp, £30, ISBN 9780300259803

Just when 2016's uproar among militant rationalist "skeptics" – caused by Michael Grosso's two-book endorsement of the levitations of St Joseph of Copertino – had subsided, the quiet appearance of this professorial study of the aerial exploits of Catholic saints is likely to rekindle the anger of those chronic complainers.

Eire – an award-wining professor of religious history at Yale – begins by anticipating the question of why anyone would bother spending so much time and effort on an obscure subject that would "baffle, bore, offend or annoy the hell out of everyone else" – or worse, that would result in his condemnation as "eccentric" and "dangerous" and in his book being consigned to the "crackpot sect-ion of bookstores".

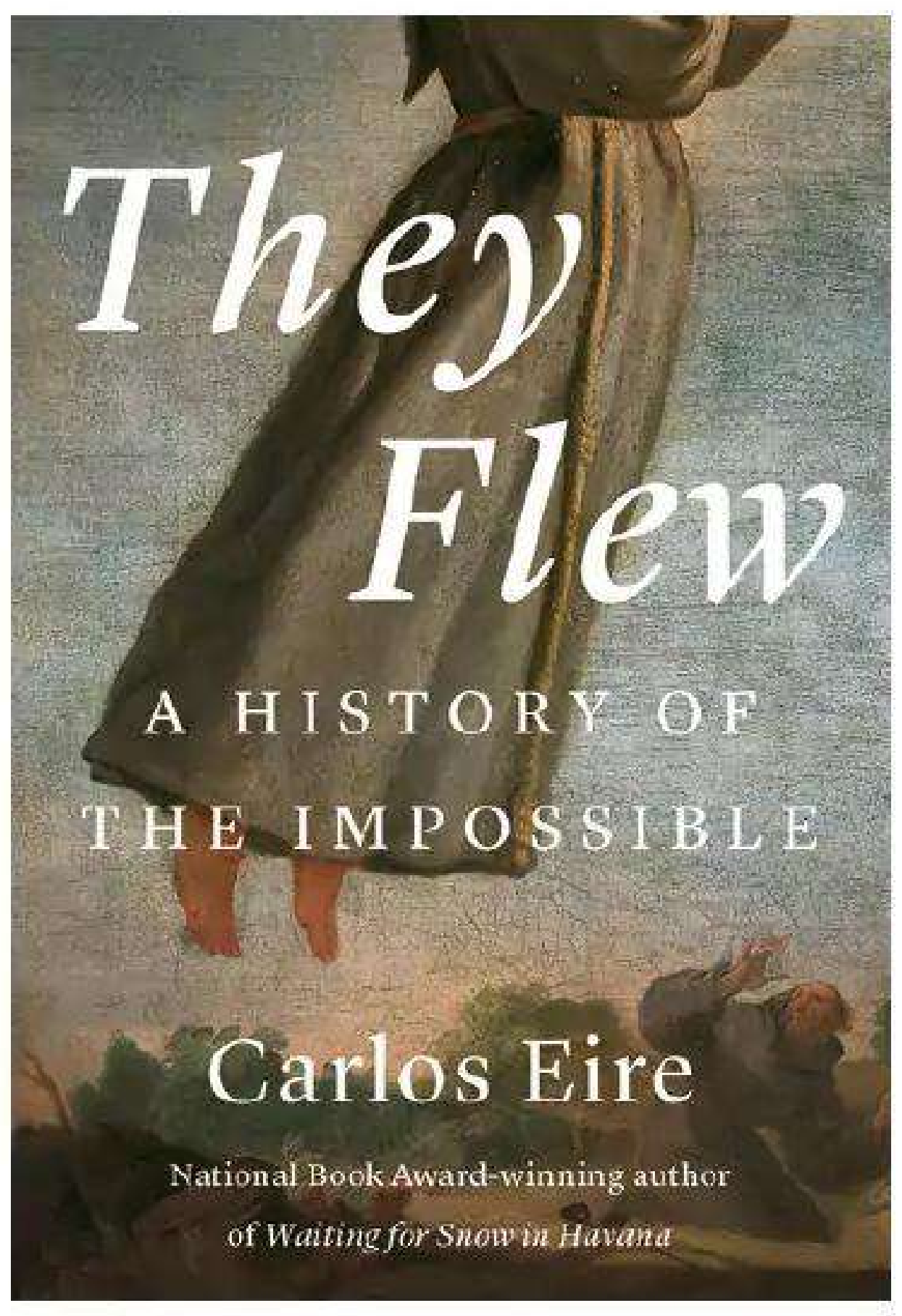
His answer should please all forteans. "This important subject has been ignored or sidelined for far too long." By way of introduction, Eire philosophises about how a historian would go about writing a history of impossible ideas. Although we cannot explore levitation itself as a fact, we can deal with the testimony about it.

In the absence of analysable photographs or films "all we have is the fact that thousands of testimonies exist in which human beings swear they saw another human being hover or fly, or suddenly materialise or vanish.

He points out – with both astonishment and amusement – that the great numbers of scholars who specialise in witchcraft frequently ignore levitation (or witch's flight) despite it being a trait consistently associated also with prophets, the supernaturally abducted, the possessed, shamans, mediums, mystics, fairies, poltergeists and so on.

Nor are standard dictionary definitions of much help. Their erroneous comparisons with magnetic-levitation or assumption that levitation is some form of anti-gravity are confused and misleading, when the phenomenon might well be something that is not yet known yet wonderfully different.

I like the simplicity of Eire's own definition: "the act of rising into the air and remaining aloft". It is the "remaining" in the air that characterises human levitation. He also ventures to define bilocation as "the act of being present in two distinct locations simultaneously". This is not just something that "cannot" happen, but also something that no one can ever witness in both locations simultaneously – surely a quantum-type puzzle.


They Flew
A HISTORY OF THE IMPOSSIBLE
Carlos Eire
National Book Award-winning author of Waiting for Snow in Havana

I imagine that the Jesuit historian Herbert Thurston (author of *The Physical Phenomena of Mysticism*, 1952) would have warmed to *They Flew*, because Eire has done what no other Catholic writer on the subject has managed to do. Firstly, he provides a wealth of new archival data (much of it in English from Latin and Spanish for the first time) thanks to the combined resources of the US university libraries, helpful librarians and today's Internet archives. Eire has not been hampered as nearly all the early writers on these subjects were by the dogmatic imperatives of their faith. They were required to accept only levitations by Christians as "genuine" and "miracles" enacted by God; all others were condemned as demonic in origin.

I like the simplicity of Eire's definition: 'the act of rising into the air and remaining aloft'

Olivier Leroy's more anthropologically based study (*Levitation*, 1928) had already moved beyond Thurston's rather cautious comments about Spiritualist mediumship, by more openly comparing the levitations of Christian saints with non-Christian analogues (including shamans and the possessed).

The book has three sections; the first of which is a wide-ranging history of reports and ideas about levitation and their reception by various religions, politicians, philosophers and scientists throughout the Great Enlightenment.

Against that background Eire presents a fascinating study of St Teresa of Avila and St Joseph of Copertino, whose remarkable lives and even more remarkable phenomena were quite different from each other. Teresa left a unique record of her experiences, while Joseph – probably the most prolific levitator known to us, whose well-observed flights were preceded by a sudden terrifying shriek – said very little.

The middle section of the book is an enlightening analysis of ecstatic flight, teleportation and bilocation. His star example is Sister Maria de Ágreda, who claimed visions of the lives of Jesus and his mother, as well as her famous transatlantic trips from Spain to evangelise the natives of the New World as the "Lady in Blue". As an historian, Eire avoids the usual dilemmas posed by "the Devil" – who supposedly mimics divine miracles. However, he accepts that demonology is a critical part of the discourse about any kind of "miraculous" phenomenon.

It is our good fortune, then, that he devotes the whole of the third part of the book to discussion of Satanic tricks, pious frauds by "disgraced nuns", demoniacs, "false prophets" and mediums of all kinds, while discussing accounts from other religions with strong traditions of levitating mystics. Eire also includes the first known attempt at a chronological listing of bilocators.

I must confess my bias here, as these subjects have been the focus of several decades of my own research. Prof Eire is sincerely sympathetic to the complexities and strangeness of the human condition and writes elegantly and clearly without thickets of footnotes.

If you'd like to judge for yourself, there is a short essay from this book on the Public Domain Review website for 8 November 2023: https://tinyurl.com/mpthkh3a. His closing essay on the relevance of such phenomena in both religious and secular societies of the 21st century is recommended reading for all forteans.

★★★★★

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David V Barrett enjoys a scholarly and beautifully illustrated work

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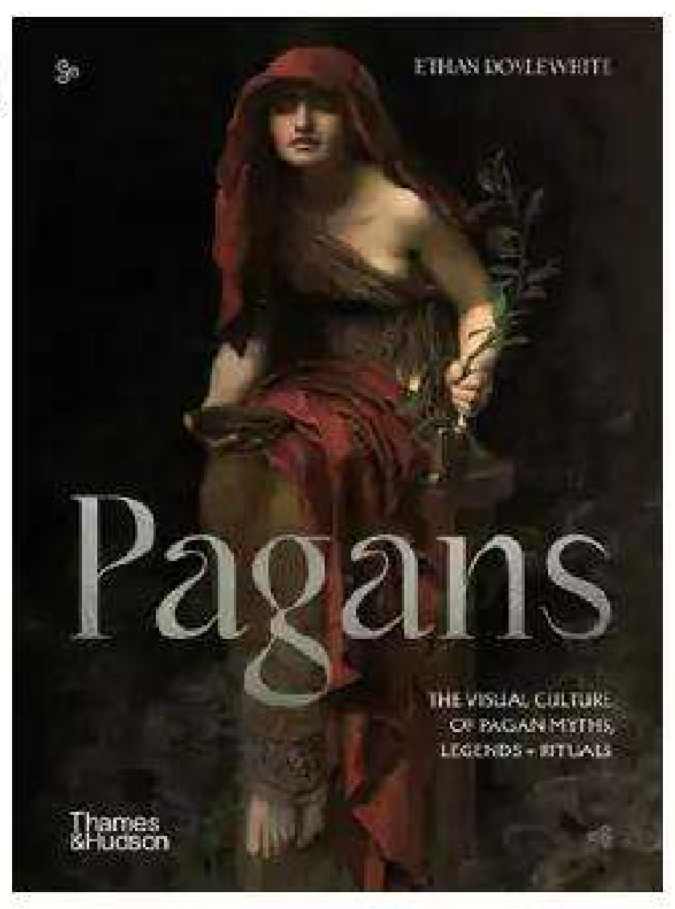
Thames & Hudson 2023

Hb, 256pp, £25, ISBN 9780500025741

Pagans is a visually stunning book. Almost every one of the stiff paper pages has images of one form of Paganism or another, over the centuries, across the world. But it's not just an attractive picture book; the text is solidly scholarly, as one would expect from Ethan Doyle White, an academic who specialises in European pre-Christian religions and modern Paganism. His 2016 book *Wicca: History, belief and community in modern Pagan witchcraft* (**FT341:62**) was an outstanding overview of how its subject has been treated by academics and practitioners.



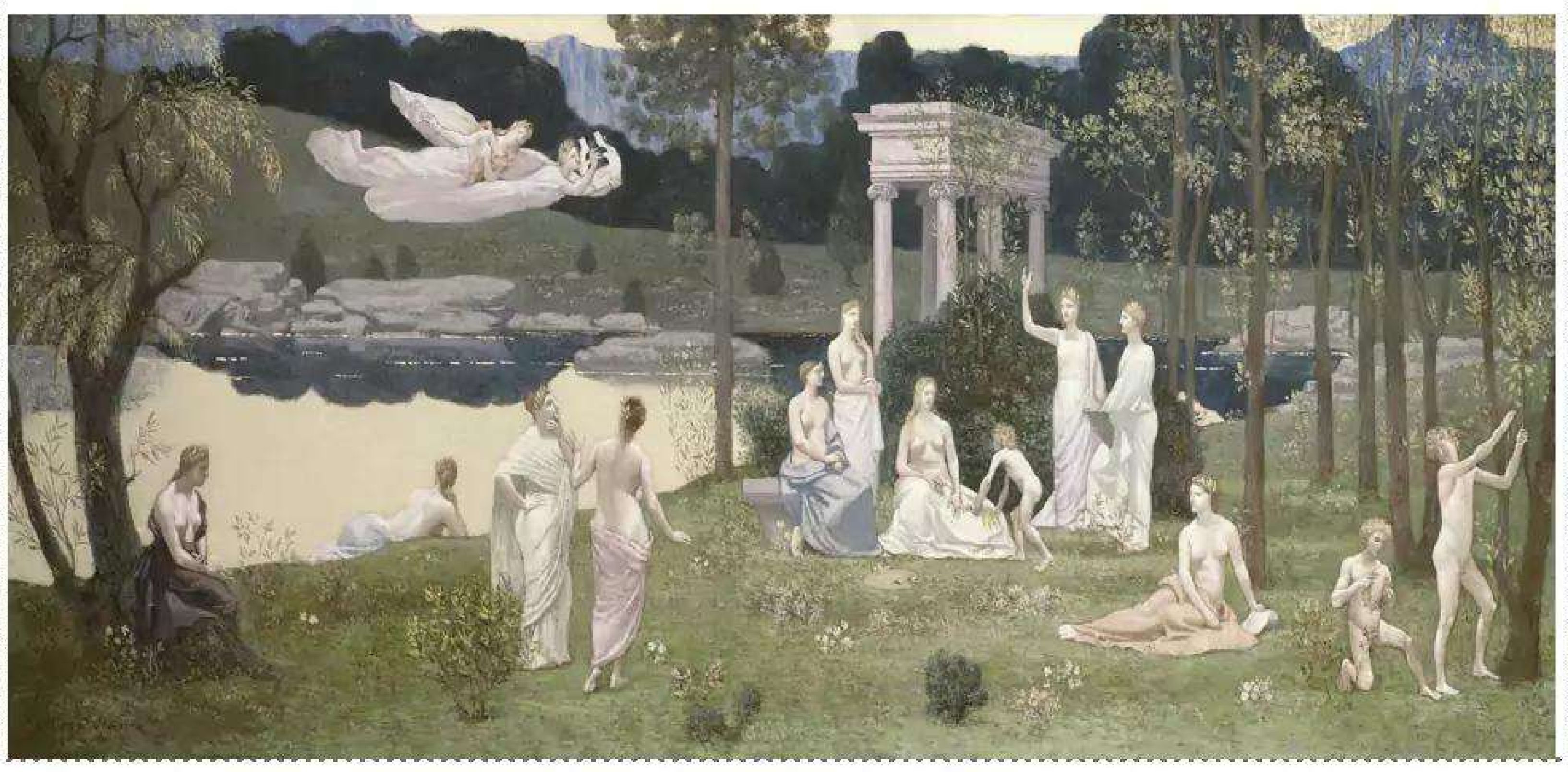
Pagans covers a lot in its three parts: Ancient Ways, with chapters on Goddesses and Gods, Myths and Legends and Numinous Nature; Ritual, with Sacred Sites, Witchcraft and Oracles and Divination; and Community, with chapters entitled Festivals, Embodied faith and Journeying.

The author deals firmly with a number of myths, such as Paganism being descended from a British or European "Old Religion" whose members were persecuted in the "Burning Times". Promoted by writers like Margaret Murray, this was actually a useful origin myth when Wicca began in the 1950s; but the vast majority of Pagans now accept that present-day Paganism is a new religious movement.

Perhaps more difficult to shake off because it was quite understandably adopted and promoted by the feminist movement over the last few decades, is the myth of "matriarchal prehistory". Doyle White writes: "this 'myth' relies on a highly selective and ideologically charged reading of archæological evidence and has not kept up with developing understandings of European prehistory".

Throughout the book there are spreads of "Profiles" (Egyptian or Norse Gods and Goddesses, Yoruba Orishas, the 12 Labours of Hercules, Thor, Sacred Trees, Sacred Rocks and Mountains, Sacred Waters, Sacred Plants), and of "Decoding" the Olympian or Hindu Gods and Goddesses, or the Judgment of Paris, or Homeric Heroes, or Fairies – and these are just from part one of the book. Such "Profiles" and "Decodings" are typical features of an image-driven book, and on the whole they're well done; my one criticism is that it would have been helpful to have them listed in the Contents, in order to be able to find them without searching through the whole book.

★★★★★



© THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO, POTTER PALMER COLLECTION

The Witches Almanac

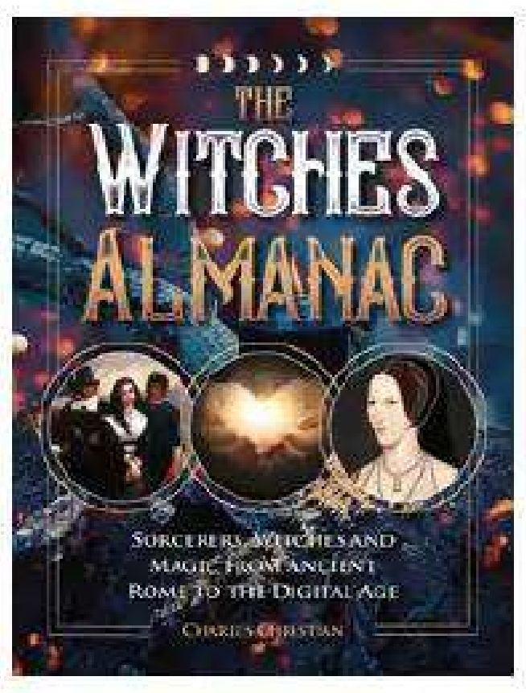
Sorcerers, Witches and Magic from Ancient Rome to the Digital Age

Charles Christian

Visible Ink Press 2023

Pb, 350pp, £17.99, ISBN 9781578597604

Regardless of place, epoch and political orthodoxy, sorcery is decidedly transcultural. Charles Christian's almanac reins in a significant volume of biographical and historical material. A plethora of personalities and events are considered in a confident and authoritative manner alongside an appraisal of the persecution, misogyny and hysteria that sadly accompany the subject.



Organised chronologically, the book begins in the Classical world and the emergence of civil society under closely aligned political and religious elites and the expedient vilification of folk magic and dissident philosophies. The imperial might of the Mesopotamian, Græco-Roman and Egyptian worlds all sought to codify religious practice and the author cites a document such as the Hammurabi Code (1750 BC) as representative of the origin of social "othering". Indicative biographical material addresses both known and legendary figures alike.

Christian contextualises the Middle Ages and the Renaissance periods by highlighting the consolidation of state and religious power over beleaguered populations. Europe, economically agrarian, maintained its own traditions of herbalism, divination and spell casting; witchcraft and sorcery coexisted with its doctrinaire overlords. Common to many of the people he documents is their wilful exploitation of ignorance wherever they found it and regardless of class. Take for example Michael Scot (1175-1232) – the Wizard of the North – whose influence won him a place at the court of Emperor Frederick II (1194-1250). Sorcery had become an aspirational discipline, it seems.

Pulling no punches in his accounts of the hysteria, persecution and intolerance that followed the publication of the *Malleus Maleficarum* (1486) Christian covers the period of the great witch trials in detail. Whether you were a local prophet like Mother Shipton (1486-1561) or a powerful courtly intriguer such as Dr John Lambe (1545-1628) the policing of "influencers" was equally punitive, we discover; a knock on the door from Matthew Hopkins (1620-1647) was indeed a real threat. By the early modern period, the landscape becomes far more familiar. The theocratic authoritarianism of the 16th and 17th centuries gives way to a heterodox cauldron of alchemy, ceremonial magic, Freemasonry and "toad bone" cunning folk. Mystical liberalism with a smattering of libertinism!

Christian draws a clear genealogical line between the centuries and the latter part of the almanac is replete with the key players in 19th- and 20th-century magic. We find such luminaries as Dion Fortune (1891-1946), Wiccan revivalist Gerald Gardner (1884-1946) and lesser-known figures; the rural mage Robert Cochrane (1931-1966), for example, undergo scrutiny. His consideration of the Satanic Panic of the 1980s parallels the dark years of persecution exemplified by the great witch trials of Pendle (1612) and Salem (1692/93) allowing him scope to tackle his overarching ideas of patriarchy and control. By concluding with a brief mention of a more recent trend in North American witchcraft which embraces environmental, feminist and LGBTQ+ discourses – Zsuzsanna Budapest and Starhawk – he strikes a positive note amidst a dark and disturbing history in part.

A thoroughly enjoyable survey with copious illustrations, thematic inset panels, index and basic bibliography: suitable for a broad readership.

Chris Hill

★★★★

Nothing is Beyond Our Reach

America's Techno-Spy Empire

Kristie Macrakis

Georgetown University Press 2023

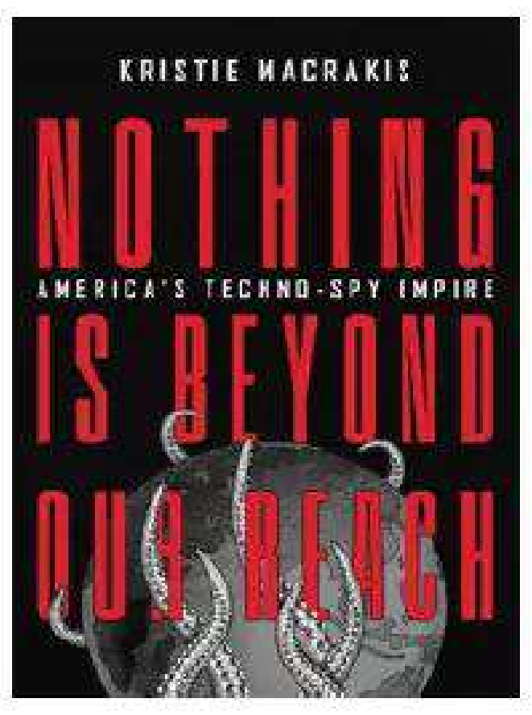
Hb, 280pp, £25, ISBN 9781647123239

The gist of Kristie Macrakis's new book is that the American intelligence community, and the CIA in particular, places too much faith

in new technology and has lost the knack of old-fashioned espionage, favouring satellites and drones over traditional "human intelligence" or humint.

Each chapter focuses on a specific case such as the use of U-2 spy planes during the Cuban Missile Crisis and the covert tapping of Soviet underwater communications. There is even a chapter on the celebrated MKUltra mind control project.

We get some entertaining, if well-worn, Cold War spy stories, such as the creation of a fake underwater mineral exploration company to cover the retrieval of a sunken Soviet sub, and tunnelling into East Berlin to listen in on the Russians. Macrakis makes the point that however good the CIA's technical means were, they were repeatedly compromised by traitors such as the infamous John Walker.



Unfortunately, the technical side is weak, a serious flaw when the big question is about what the technology can do. For example, the discussion of spy satellites never talks about their actual capabilities and limitations (they cannot read number plates from orbit, but you will not find that here).

The chapter on MKUltra scratches the surface of the project before veering off into a long condemnation on the use of torture after 9/11. A deeper exploration of MKUltra's weird and wonderful efforts to get inside the human brain – covered occasionally in these pages – would have been welcome.

Similarly, Project Stargate using psychic spies, perhaps the ultimate in the optimistic use of technical means, does not even get a mention. The book also fails to mention any number of other CIA projects which embody the spirit of techno-optimism, from wiring a trained cat with microphones for eavesdropping ("acoustic kitty") to the 1970s' laser-guided spy dragonflies. The fantastic Genetrix and other spy balloons, which generated numerous UFO reports, are dismissed in half a paragraph.

More seriously, the book treats the CIA in isolation and rarely looks at the wider intelligence-gathering community. This is a mistake, as aerial reconnaissance for example did not begin and end with the agency and the U-2. The treatment of new technology such as AI, which promises to transform the intelligence business by sifting through the mountains of data and finding correlations which humans would miss, is quite offhand.

Nothing is Beyond Our Reach is a decent introduction as far as it goes. But it could have gone considerably further.

David Hambling

★★★

Palatine

An Alternative History Of The Caesars

Peter Stothard

Weidenfeld & Nicolson 2023

Hb, 336pp, £22, ISBN 9781474620994

Peter Stothard's "alternative" is to give star billing to Vitellius, one of three ephemeral rulers in the so-called "Year of the Four Emperors" (AD 69). Vitellius gets short thrift from Suetonius and modern historians (including my own *Roman Emperors*, 1980). One wonders how he'll fare in Mary Beard's forthcoming book on the Cæsars.

As a boy he was buggered by Tiberius. While charioteering with Caligula, he sustained a mangled leg. He won Claudius's affection through a common passion for dicing, and Nero's by extravagant praise of the latter's poems. He was the fattest and most gluttonous of emperors. His obesity prolonged his hideous death "by a thousand cuts", having been dragged half-naked through the streets, pelted with excrement and when finally dead tossed down "The Wailing Stairs" into the Tiber, a frequent subject of European painters. One's sympathies are restrained by his own many brutal executions.

Vitellius and family dominate Stothard's narrative, but he also provides detailed coverage of all Rome's rulers from Julius Cæsar to Vespasian. Exotic "fortean" details abound, from Augustus's exhibition of a nine-foot-tall man to Claudius's ban on stuffed dormice (too extravagant) – plus importing the first elephant to England – to Nero' s transgender experiment on a boy he would then marry.

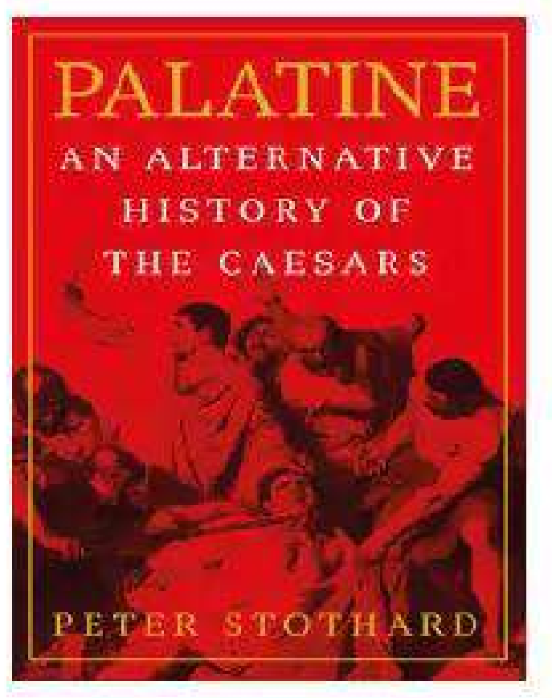
As befits Vitellius and the others, Stothard offers a rich menu of exotic foods and sex, especially anal and oral varieties. For a good modern gloss on the food side, see Witold Szablowski's *How To Feed a Dictator* (2020).

A caveat here. Stothard retails Tiberius's repulsive sexual maltreatment of infant children from Suetonius without noting that the Roman biographer dismissed them as mere gossip – one hopes he was right.

There are a few shaky details. Suetonius's biographies do not end with Vespasian. Horace was not the pioneer in Roman satire – that was Lucilius. Augustus's exiled daughter Julia was not "part of half-forgotten history" – her famous jokes were in popular circulation centuries later. But, as Anglo-Indian communist Palme Dutt said of Stalin's show trials, these are merely "spots on the Sun".

Another Stothardian virtue is that he is not confined to the usual diet of Cassius Dio, Suetonius and Tacitus, being adept at teasing out political and social history from Phædrus's fables, Scribonius Largus's medical prescriptions and Grattius's dog poem – British ones (apparently mastiff ancestors) commended for their aggressiveness.

Stothard's prose is sometimes over-ripe to my taste. But he writes in real English, no nonsensical academic jargon, laced with wit and a pervading irony. The book is buttressed by copious informative end-notes, substantial bibliography and serviceable index.



Stothard (former editor of the *Times* and *TLS*) has written five previous equally superb books on classical topics. I already look forward to his next…

Barry Baldwin

★★★★★

The Yowie File

Encounters with Australian Ape-men

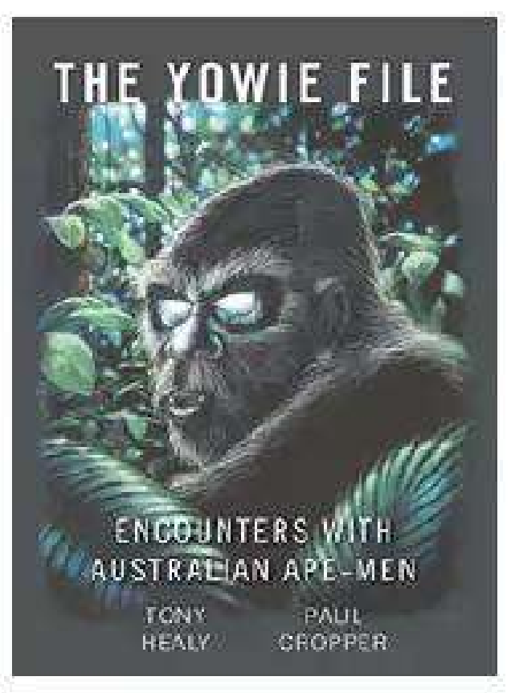
Tony Healy & Paul Cropper

Fortean Publishing 2023

Hb, 336pp, £39.95, ISBN 9780645739213

Tony Healy is an Aussie monster hunter who has spent a lifetime on the track of unknown animals. On a number of occasions he has teamed up with fellow antipodean fortean Paul Cropper to create some first-rate books including *Out of the Shadows: The Mystery Animals of Australia*, *The Yowie: In Search of Australia's Bigfoot* and *Australian Poltergeist*.

Their latest offering, *The Yowie File*, continues in the very high standard they have set. The book looks at a total of 273 cases from 1789 to 2021. It is not unlike the section in Janet and Colin Bord's *Bigfoot Casebook* that lists sasquatch sightings from 1818 to 1982, but this book goes into far greater detail.



Unlike their previous book on the yowie, this is not an in-depth analysis but a list of cases. The authors are not afraid to call out cases that they think are hoaxes and equally to point out the ones they think are likely to be real.

What emerges from this data set suggests two kinds of encounter. The first is a meeting with what seems to be a relic hominid, some kind of primate, maybe a relation of one of the ancestors of man. The second involves elements of high strangeness-like meetings with black panthers or UFOs in the same area, and ghost-like elements. In one amazing case from Wilcannia, New South Wales, in 1946, it seems a yowie is haunting a house like a ghost; it stomps around in the middle of poltergeist outbreaks, looms over beds and tries to drag a woman off by her neck.

The authors opt for the paranormal explanation for the yowie over a flesh-and-blood animal. I myself think it's not an either/or but two discrete phenomena, one zoological and one paranormal. It is interesting with the yowie and bigfoot that there are both seemingly flesh-and-blood accounts and high strangeness ones, but with Asian man-beasts like the yeti, almasty and orang-pendek, the latter are almost unknown. Make of that what you will.

The Yowie File is a thrilling, fascinating read that will either have you shaking in your boots with fear or, like me, longing to get out on the trail of the Australian yeti.

Richard Freeman

★★★★★

Gypsies: ‘the normal people’

Paul Cowdell appreciates an honest and informed history of British Gypsies written by one of our foremost folklorists

Travellers Through Time

A Gypsy History

Jeremy Harte

Reaktion Books 2023

Hb, 320pp, £20, ISBN 9781789147162

The polymath folklorist Jeremy Harte should be familiar to *FT* readers as an entertaining authority on such subjects as local traditions, mysterious geography and the Devil in place-names. This developed in conjunction with his day job as a museum curator, where he also founded the Surrey Gypsy Archive, and this excellent book is a further product of that work.

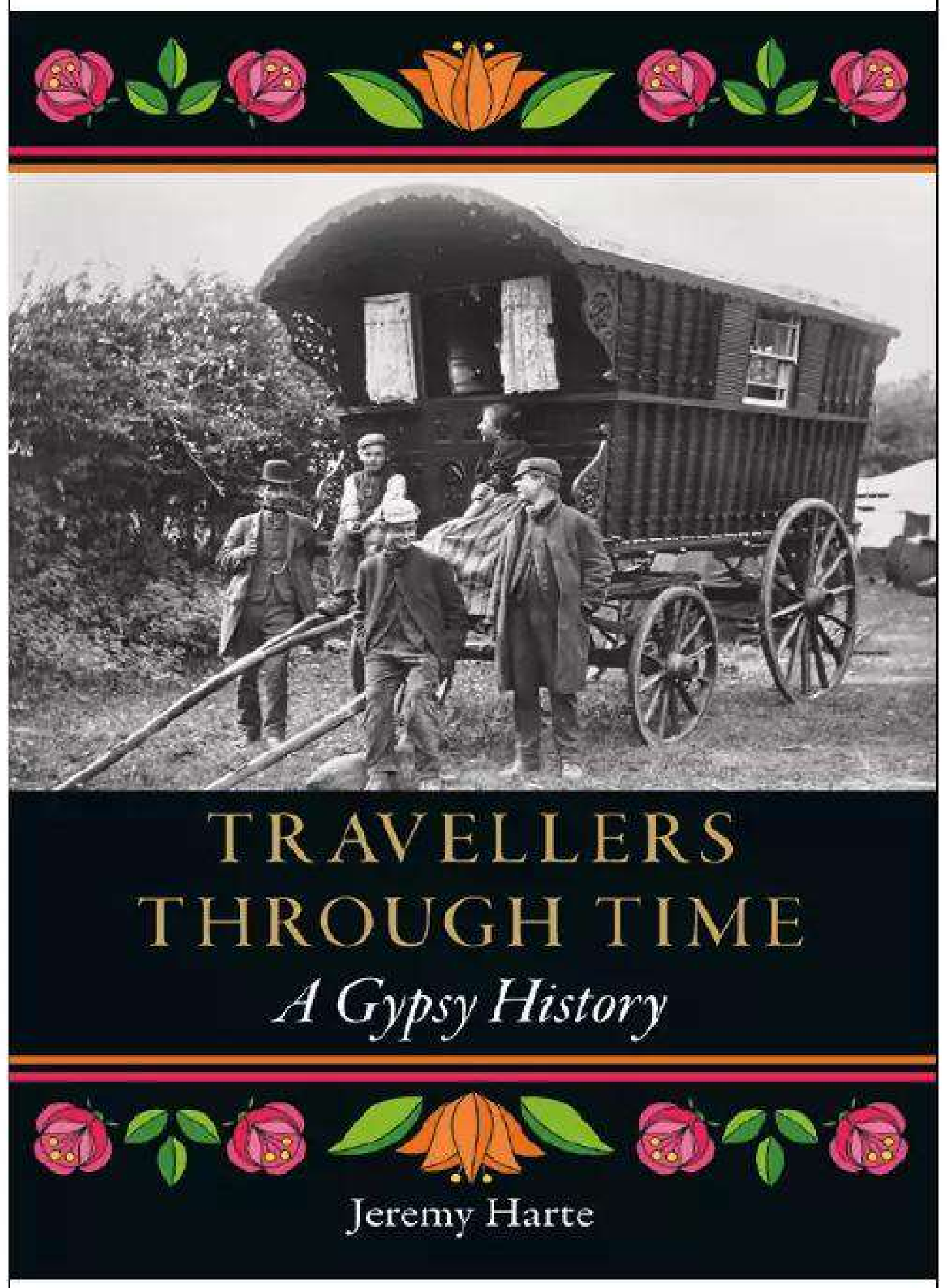
As straight history, rather than the arcana for which Harte may be better known, this is the sort of book that might not immediately grab the *FT* reader’s attention. That would be a mistake, partly because discussion of superstitions etc is scattered throughout, but mainly because this book provides the context for understanding them.

Harte aimed to write an honest and informed history of British Gypsies from as close to their own perspective as an outsider can get: in his words, “Well, damn me if I don’t write a book in which it’s the Gypsies who are the normal people, and my own breed the outsiders.” The prologue recounts a conversation with several Gypsies about whether such a project was even possible, as well as its ethics and rationale. Gypsy and Traveller commentators and journalists have noted with depressing frequency that anti-Gypsyism remains the last acceptable form of racism.

Under these conditions, Harte’s effort is to be applauded. (He also helpfully discusses why British Gypsies do use the word “Gypsy”, which is less in favour elsewhere).

A narrative history like this one always risks romanticising or exoticising its subjects. Harte treads that line carefully by using an impressive range of in-depth sources, many of them unfamiliar. He does not shy away from the growth of racism (his charting of its historical development is interesting), and his careful study of census figures brings out just how exaggerated the numbers have been when it comes to alleging Gypsy hordes. He also provides a thoughtful overview of the increasing regulatory harassment of Gypsies, and a sympathetic and good-humoured comment on some of the more inventive approaches taken to circumventing that bureaucratic interference.

There are better historical surveys of the legal measures aimed at forcing Gypsies off the road while simultaneously preventing them from settling, but Harte has not written a tale of woe. This is an engagement with a community here and now, and looking to the future. That also is welcome, although it is where his sympathy becomes rather vaguer and less concrete. That future needs to be told by Gypsy voices.



But Harte uses those voices as much as he possibly can. This is easier with recent history, reflecting his close relations with the community and confident oral history. He is writing often of people he knows, and the book is better for it, illustrated with close family histories. Direct quotation is not available for much of the earlier history, and one of Harte’s techniques is to couch his narrative in language more familiar to Gypsy than *gorjer* (as they call non-Gypsies). He manages not to make this sound like affectation or linguistic tourism. Instead, he usefully pushes the reader towards a different viewpoint.

He has the advantage of a good linguistic grounding, and gives an informative historical discussion of the languages involved, using this as his way into the arrival of Gypsies in Tudor England. This is all backed up with an extensive and excellent glossary of Anglo-Romani/Romanes words.

His regional expertise is well to the fore in areas of particular interest to *FT* readers. Hygiene and cleanliness restrictions, widely and familiarly known as *mochadi*, are here discussed using the southern variant *mogadi*, with Harte noting that the *mokkadi* form is universally used in the north. There are also fascinating glimpses into subjects like witchcraft, remedies and superstitions. The book remains a concrete discussion of actual life, bringing out the distinctions between the latter and the commercial practice of *dukkering* (fortune-telling).

Harte is at his best when suggesting a bigger picture by recounting minutiæ. This provides a constant treasure trove of detail, like his accounts of naming practices. These are essential in Gypsy histories, but I was delighted to read of a 19th-century Gypsy boxer named Jem Chewbacca Matthews. This approach can make even narrative history discursive – it is frustrating that individuals he has detailed so carefully appear in the index only within their broader family – but it simply emphasises that this book deserves and needs to be read carefully and repeatedly. Hopefully it can contribute to a new relationship.

★★★★

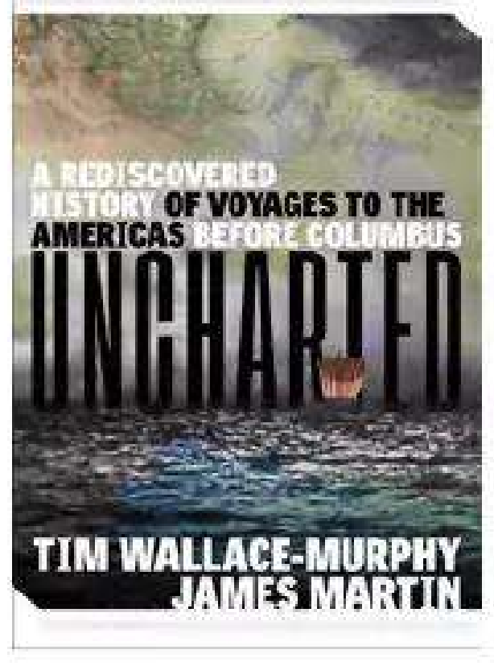
Uncharted

A Rediscovered History of Voyages to the Americas Before Columbus

Tim Wallace-Murphy & James Martin

New Page Books 2023

Pb, 214pp, £16.99, ISBN 9781637480113


A REDISCOVERED HISTORY OF VOYAGES TO THE AMERICAS BEFORE COLUMBUS
UNCHARTED
TIM WALLACE-MURPHY
JAMES MARTIN

This strange little book rails against an Establishment orthodoxy that no longer exists. No mainstream archæologist thinks it “ridiculous” to claim that there was contact with the Americas before Columbus, or believes that ancient people were “backward” and “unsophisticated”. Indeed, last year a peer-reviewed article in *Nature* confirmed the long-accepted presence of Viking settlements along the northernmost coastline of the New World.

So why do the authors lay out their claims in this fashion? Perhaps because they rely on many sources that are over 30 years old (and some a lot older). The book was still incomplete when Wallace-Murphy died, leaving it to Martin to polish off, years after it might have packed a more satisfying anti-Establishment punch.

The second half of their book moves on from the Vikings to a swashbuckling tale of Venetian mercenaries, Templar knights and the gallant voyages of Henry St Clair, Earl of Orkney. This section makes for an enjoyable, evocative and at times thought-provoking yarn; who knows, some of it might even be true. Much of their story hinges on the Newport Tower (it’s old, but how old?) and the alleged carving of the “Westford Knight” (which requires better eyesight and more faith than I have to make out).

Their genuinely controversial claims for the Romans and Egyptians rest on shakier ground, using evidence that is challenged in mainstream sources freely available online. And having made their case for the long-established exchange of copper and corn and other goods along transatlantic trading networks in deep antiquity, the authors fail to explain why our Old World diseases proved such a deadly surprise to the Native Americans.

The limited number of pictures and maps represents a missed opportunity to really bring their alternative history to life.

Ryan Shirlow

★★

ALSO RECEIVED

WE LEAF THROUGH A SMALL SELECTION OF THE DOZENS OF BOOKS THAT HAVE ARRIVED AT FORTEAN TOWERS IN RECENT MONTHS...

Famous Occultists and Witches

Their Biographies and Birth Charts

Andrea J Miles

Greenmagicpublishing.com 2022

Pb, 347pp, £15.28. ISBN 9780307986498

This quiet, studious study is an unexpected discovery, consisting of well-researched biographies of famous and notorious witches and occultists with ‘birth-charts’ thrown in. Of astrologers, ‘Cheiro’, Linda Goodman and the witch Sybil Leek are numbered. Among the Wiccans are Gerald Gardner, Stewart Farrar, Doreen Valiente, Scott Cunningham and Alex Sanders. Representing the occultists is Dion Fortune, with Margaret Murray, Eric Maple and Cecil Williamson (founder of the Museum of Witchcraft) as folklorists of occult and witch lore. Helen Duncan (the last person to be imprisoned in Britain’s under the Witchcraft Act of 1735) joins them too; but the star of this strange constellation has to be the relatively little known George Pickingill (d.1909), believed to have tutored Crowley and Gardner among others. Although he was a farm labourer, he was feared by rural folk far beyond the Essex village of Canewdon as a powerful ‘Cunning Man’ and an ancient wizard. The life and works of each character have a detailed coverage, supplemented with rare photos, lists of relevant publications and material, and an astrological assessment. A delightful read as well as a useful and handy reference for writers and historians of the paranormal.

UFOs: The Real Story

Paul Ascough

Flying Disk Press 2023

Pb, 213pp, £12.75. ISBN 9798377040811

This slender book is the testament of Paul Ascough, retired nurse and paramedic. Over the previous decades he had had his own UFO experiences compelling him to publish his own shuffle of all the available data and information on the subject for the benefit of newcomers to the subject. It is heavily filtered though his family belief in Spiritualism, which in turn led to communications from ‘space people’ via local mediums. He believes that he himself is being ‘guided’ to reveal the ‘truth’ behind the big deceptions within ufology (such as abductions and landings) and the bad alien faction that is targeting humanity (a theme repeated in other FDP titles). A curious and eccentric read (marred by FDP’s eye-straining layouts and entrenched resistance to indexing or proofreading).

Triangular UFOs of the United Kingdom

Colin Saunders

Flying Disk Press 2023

Pb, 247pp, illus, £12.21. ISBN 9798366018159

Colin Saunders, a retired technical draughtsman, had a life-changing encounter with a pyramidal (herein called triangular) UFO in 1999 and has devoted himself to pursuing its fellows. In addition to his own sighting, he presents over 130 illustrated cases of this type along with his theories about “alien telepathy”, concluding that “UFOs and the paranormal” are linked by “a science we do not understand”. Another book stamped with the hallmarks of FDP editorial oversight, this time with a novel innovation. Falling short of filling the page count? Up the point size. Problem solved!

Paranormal

Case Files of Great Britain Volume 4

Malcolm Robinson

Flying Disk Press 2023

Pb, 457pp, £17.75. ISBN 979390802359

Malcolm Robinson is an experienced veteran of Scottish ufology and his subtitle – *Case Files of Great Britain Volume 4* – does what it says, with five detailed investigations. This latest compilation also carries an endorsement by Whitley Streiber. Although written for his fellow ufologists, the cases here – and to an extent, the two books above – seem to be heading in a similar direction. Robinson’s interest in UFOs is present throughout, in that it informs his interpretation of such paranormal experiences as ghosts, premonitions, apparitions of imp-like entities and poltergeists. Particularly disturbing is the Scottish haunting in which a mother and daughter were persecuted for several years by poltergeist phenomena and “spiritual abuse” from “a nasty spirit that refused to leave the family home”. Consequently, these cases would be of prime interest to folklorists and parapsychologists if the book can gain any visibility outside its niche publication. The content is interesting, but it is a relentless slab of reading, with no index.

Illustrated Tales of Northumberland

Rob Kirkup

Amberley Publishing 2023

Pb, 96pp, £15.99. ISBN 9781445698847

It’s about time Northumberland – the site of the bloodiest battle in English history (Flodden Field, 1513) where 14,000 people died – had un updated local history and Rob Kirkup, a local historian and ghost-hunter, does it admirably and concisely. Many of its classic castles (such as Alnwick) have been backdrops to films. The celebrated Laidly Worm haunts a rural lake; dwarves roam the Simonside Hills; and its bleak moors are home to the Brown Man and Redcap goblins. The northern lights appeared here when King Charles was beheaded in London. Berwick has its vampire; and Hedley has its shapeshifting ‘koo’. ‘Black Adam’ haunts Hen Hole; but fairies favour Callaly village, Cambo Hill and Brinkburn Priory. Visitors will be charmed by the eerie Three Sisters Waterfall and the weird Hermitage at Warkworth; and forteans can visit Hexham, home of the mystery of the ‘Celtic’ stone ‘heads’. It is truly an attractive county for a fortean traveller.

Myth & Lore

Created by Mark Ryan

www.mythandlore.co.uk

Pb, £8, available from www.mythandlore.co.uk

Very much a labour of love, *Myth & Lore* is a zine created by Mark Ryan, whose distinctive artworks and designs, created under the moniker of Geist, were initially the product of his determination to recover from a nervous breakdown. The zine –”dedicated to everything weird, wonderful, mythologicl and folklore based” – was conceived during lockdown and first appeared in 2022 with an issue entitled “Cryptids of the United Kingdom”. Subsequent issues have inclued “Fungus Among Us”, “Graves, Growth and the Green Man” and “Witches, Warnings and Widdershins”. Each is an attractively produced object in its own right – digest sized, perfect bound and printed on thick, quality paper in beautiful black and white – showcasing submissions of art, photography, prose and poetry as well as interviews with fellow artists, musicians and other like-minded types. Given the broad remit and range of subject matter, the quality of submissions can, of course, be variable, but this is a really positive and likeable venture, and its motto – “Folklore is for everyone” – is one that most forteans will agree with wholeheartedly.

Paranormal Buckinghamshire

Eddie Brazil

Amberley Publishing 2023

Pb, 96pp, £15.99. ISBN 9781398114654

Illustrated Tales of Kent

Naomi Dickins

Amberley Publishing 2023

Pb, 96pp, £15.99. ISBN 9781398101838.

Local historians record a selection of remarkable events, notable places, legendary characters from witches to villains, ghosts, unnatural beasts, and terrible battles; served up with excellent modern and historical illustrations. If you are going to Kent or Buckinghamshire, these would make excellent guidebooks for the curious fortean.

The banality of evil

This pedestrian new documentary about William Friedkin's Seventies horror game-changer is content to trot out archive footage and old interviews without bringing anything new to the table

The Exorcist Untold

Dir Pete Bextor, UK 2023
Available on DVD and digital platforms

Being a(nother) documentary about the Friedkin/Blatty planet-devouring megahit from 1973, claimed to be the highest-grossing horror film of them all. Unfortunately, there is almost nothing in *The Exorcist Untold* that has not been told before; most of the information presented here could have been gleaned from Wikipedia or through a little Google-fu. Perhaps worst of all though, the film presents this stuff as if it's a massive revelation.

For instance, the film begins with archive footage of crowds queuing round the block at cinemas, and exit interviews with the horrified and spooked patrons. Fair enough – one needs some context – but any documentary worth its salt would examine whether audience reactions have changed over the years. To wit, when I was growing up in the 1990s *The Exorcist* ran for years at the Birmingham Odeon on a Saturday midnight showing which was routinely packed with lads who laughed all the way through.

> *It feels like a Blue Peter piece for kids who have never heard of the film*

A pattern of archive footage, interviews with academics and crew members, and clips from *The Exorcist* (mainly the trailer) is repeated through the film's brief 70 minute running time. A narrator provides a voice-over to link it altogether and doesn't do a great job of it, I'm sorry to say. At one point, describing the violent Rolling Stones concert at the Altamont Speedway Park in 1969 (repeating the cliché that the event signalled the end of the flower power era), he mispronounces 'Altamont' even as the word itself appears onscreen. The script too is clunky – phrases as banal as "as if by magic" are used throughout.

The tired trotting out of clichéd opinion doesn't stop there. In a pretty redundant listing of all the sequels and prequels, *The Exorcist II: the Heretic* predictably gets a trashing. Okay it was a box office stinkeroo, but it was a noble failure which contains some interesting ideas and startling imagery. Now a documentary about *that* film would be worth watching.

There is some mildly interesting stuff about the casting process, which comes almost entirely from an archive interview with Friedkin rather than from any original research. Jack MacGowran is mentioned, but oddly there's no reference at all to Lee J Cobb who is one of the major characters.

There really are too many flaws overall, which give the film an air of perfunctoriness and, frankly, semi-professionalism. It feels like a DVD extra on a cheap reissue, or even a *Blue Peter* piece for kids who have never heard of *The Exorcist*. Unless you're in that demographic, it's hard to recommend.

Daniel King

★★☆☆☆

Wickedly Evil

Dir Garry Walsh, Ireland 2023
Available on digital platforms

A very late contender for this year's finest Irish heist-comedy-horror film, *Wickedly Evil* (also known as *Bad Things in the Middle of Nowhere*) wears its influences proudly on its sleeve, but doesn't quite manage to forge an identity of its own.

The pitch is simple: three Irish mopes pull off a heist and flee to the aforementioned middle of nowhere to hole up and wait to be spirited out of the country. One of them is shot and bleeding heavily, Tim Roth style, one is violent and unpredictable, Michael Madsen-style, and one is vaguely sensible and tries to keep things together as the situation starts to unravel, Harvey Keitel-style. Their boss is a gruff no-nonsense intimidating crime lord, Lawrence Tierney-style. There's a hostage in the boot of the getaway car and most of the loot is missing. I think you can see the point I am, and indeed the director is, making.

If you're going to make a film about lowlifes, then you'd better give them something interesting to say because they are not very interesting people. There are a couple of good one-liners (one of the criminals wonders whether his hostage is exhibiting signs of "Stockport Syndrome") but, unlike Quentin Tarantino, Garry Walsh and his writing partner Bryan Walsh can't sustain it for 90 minutes, so we're left with unpleasant men bickering and swearing at each other. The swearing is off the chart; I don't know if this is representative of the Irish criminal class, but for the viewer it soon becomes tedious.

In drama, situations such as this require an antagonist or fly in the ointment and this role goes to next door neighbour Sadie. She tries to be helpful, but her efforts just heap further problems on the hapless trio. Eventually the boss arrives to take charge and bring the film to its violent conclusion. You may have noticed that I haven't yet mentioned the horror element in all this. The reason for that is there barely is any. It all comes in the last five or 10 minutes and, frankly, it feels tacked on, as if the director lost his nerve a bit with what he'd got and needed something explosive to finish things off, maybe at the same time as the film's title was changed.

It feels harsh to come down too hard on productions such as this. Its low budget is obvious, the performances are spirited, but one dimensional, and there's absolutely nothing you haven't seen before; but there is just about enough to keep the film going and, with better material and a bigger budget, we may yet see something decent from the talent involved.

Daniel King

★★☆☆☆

TELEVISION

FT's very own couch potato, STU NEVILLE, casts an eye over the small screen's current fortean offerings

Danny Robins has, in a very short time become the poster-boy for media investigations of weirdness. Though he has had a long career in comedy writing, he first broke the paranormal ice with his *Battersea Poltergeist* podcast for Radio 4 two years ago, and has since then become a fixture, producing 40 episodes of his series *Uncanny* for the station. Robins's approach is extremely consistent: tell the story, speak with the witnesses, ask them disarmingly probing questions and then let listeners judge for themselves. All of this is of course familiar territory, but it's Robins himself who makes the difference – his attitude is one of genuine, empathic enquiry, his manner like that of a paranormally inclined Louis Theroux.

The podcast caught on in quite a big way. Soon Robins had his own appreciation society – the Uncanny Community – who fervently follow the programmes and provide support and encouragement in what can be a somewhat divisive field, while maintaining their own sense of healthy balance and enquiry. The podcast tends to focus on ghosts, polts and similar localised phenomena, although it has branched out once or twice (an episode on Rendlesham, for instance): by and large, though, it's stuck with the domestic, which, as we all know, is often the scariest. Such was the reception and success of the radio series that television inevitably beckoned. This can of course go either way: some shows seamlessly transition, taking the added dimension of vision and incorporating it, whereas others lose something, the realised pictures exorcising the mental images and setting up a mild cognitive dissonance that will never quite allow the visual version to live up to its predecessor. Happily, in the case of *Uncanny*, this seems not to have happened.

> *"Are you," Danny asks, "Team Believer or Team Sceptic?"*

The episodes, both pod and TV, each start in the same way, with Robins up front and somewhat inclusively telling us that "We will meet ordinary people who have experienced the extraordinary," and asking "But is it supernatural, or can it be explained?" We will try to find out, he explains, actively encouraging the viewer to join in via social media for discussion in the next episode. "Are you," Danny asks, "Team Believer or Team Sceptic?"

The first episode takes us to the village of Melbourn in Cambridgeshire, where following work on a family home – a conversion that turned a pair of semis into one – a young girl named Kate started to become aware of odd things happening: doors slamming, an overwhelming feeling of being watched, any clock brought into the house malfunctioning – all spooky enough, but then an actual apparition started manifesting eventually resolving into the figure of a starched, Edwardian-looking woman whom Kate just knew was called Miss Howard. Some digging later (Danny's big on libraries, local historians and old maps) and it transpires that former occupants of the house had also seen the same figure; and, rather startlingly, also just knew that Miss Howard was her name. There had been Howards living in the street, and all three now grown women readily identify "their" Miss Howard from a vintage photo; but they all lived at different numbers, with no obvious connection to their house. Then, a rather satisfying twist brings it all together: this is where Robins's scripting experience gives him the tools to structure the narrative, sustaining the story as he leads us though the account, the investigation, the findings and beyond without noticeable lapses in pace.

Overall programme balance, meanwhile, is maintained in the pub. Robins frequently retires to The Ship, in which he confers with doughty psychologist Ciaran O'Keeffe (combat hardened by years of *Most Haunted*) and parapsychologist Evelyn Hollow, representing Team Sceptic and Team Believer respectively, both of whom bring their own perspectives and context (invariably one of them having none of it and the other a bit more open to the idea).

The second episode, follows the same format but with added comment and interaction from social media regarding the first episode – a seemingly obvious idea, but actually logistically tricky for television in near real-time (the BBC has the necessary resources to turn stuff around fast enough to allow recording up until hours before transmission and editing it in to existing footage, whereas most paranormal series will have been in the can for months by the time they hit the screen as 99% are made by indie producers for stations without live facilities beyond captioning). This has the added bonus of enabling the viewer to see said social media themselves as the week progresses, and perhaps inevitably viewers are divided, but then they always will be with this subject matter: as many come to boo as to cheer, but you can argue that, whatever the reception, the show is getting the story out there and doing it very well.

Robins is an engaging, animated host, resembling a mixture of Richard Hammond and Alex James from Blur, with a mobile face that when registering amazement borders on Harpo Marx. His enthusiasm for his subjects is manifest, as he gets out and about on the trail of his stories, his little red *Don't Look Now* anorak swishing around as he knocks on doors, looks at maps, talks to experts and pops into The Ship for another natter with Waldorf and Statler.

It all hangs together cogently, and entertainingly, and I hope the first short series heralds a longer second one; but, that said, I hope the podcast also continues to thrive as the different medium – no pun intended – engages in a different way, and personally I have a lingering hope that both versions can co-exist, with the television side acting as a barker for the pod and vice versa.

For all the buzz, watch it yourself and choose your team.

One God but many Religions.

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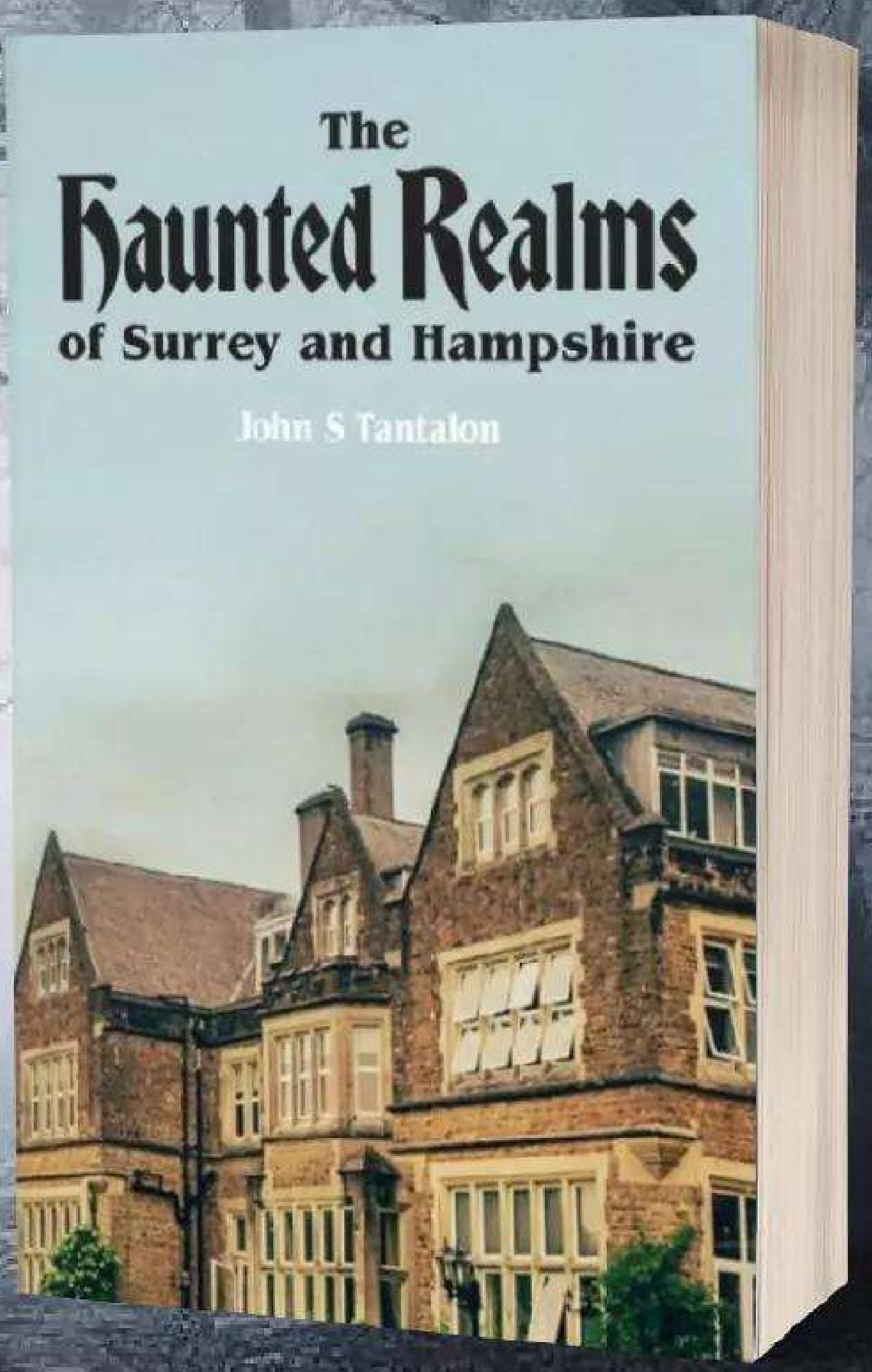
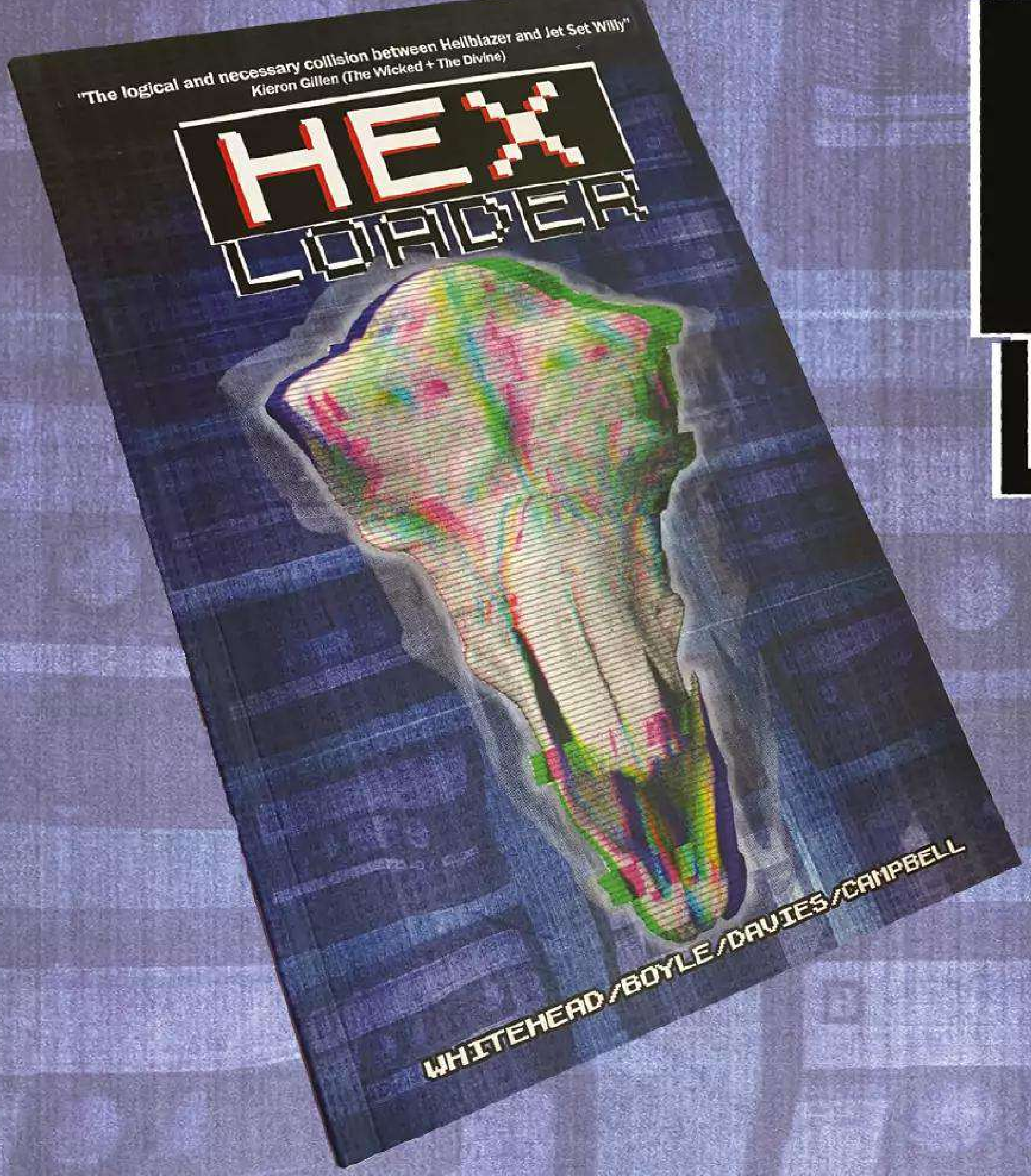

The
Haunted Realms
of Surrey and Hampshire
John S Tantalon

ARRIVING
JUNE 2023

"The logical and necessary collision between Hellblazer and Jet Set Willy"
Kieron Gillen (The Wicked + The Divine)


"The logical and necessary collision between Hellblazer and Jet Set Willy"
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Carry On hauntings

Recently I have been reading the biographies of both Kenneth Williams and Charles Hawtrey, the famous comic actors from the *Carry On* films. In both biographies I have found intriguing paranormal epilogues relating to their deaths.

In the first book, *Born Brilliant* by Christopher Stevens, the author notes how during the night of Williams's death, his friend and neighbour who lived in the flat above, Paul Richardson, had a vision of Kenneth in his bedroom during the night and said of it the following: "I thought I actually saw him in my bedroom, in the early hours of the morning, but all I could see was his face, grinning. This is absolutely true. I said 'Go away, go away', and I didn't think anything else of it."

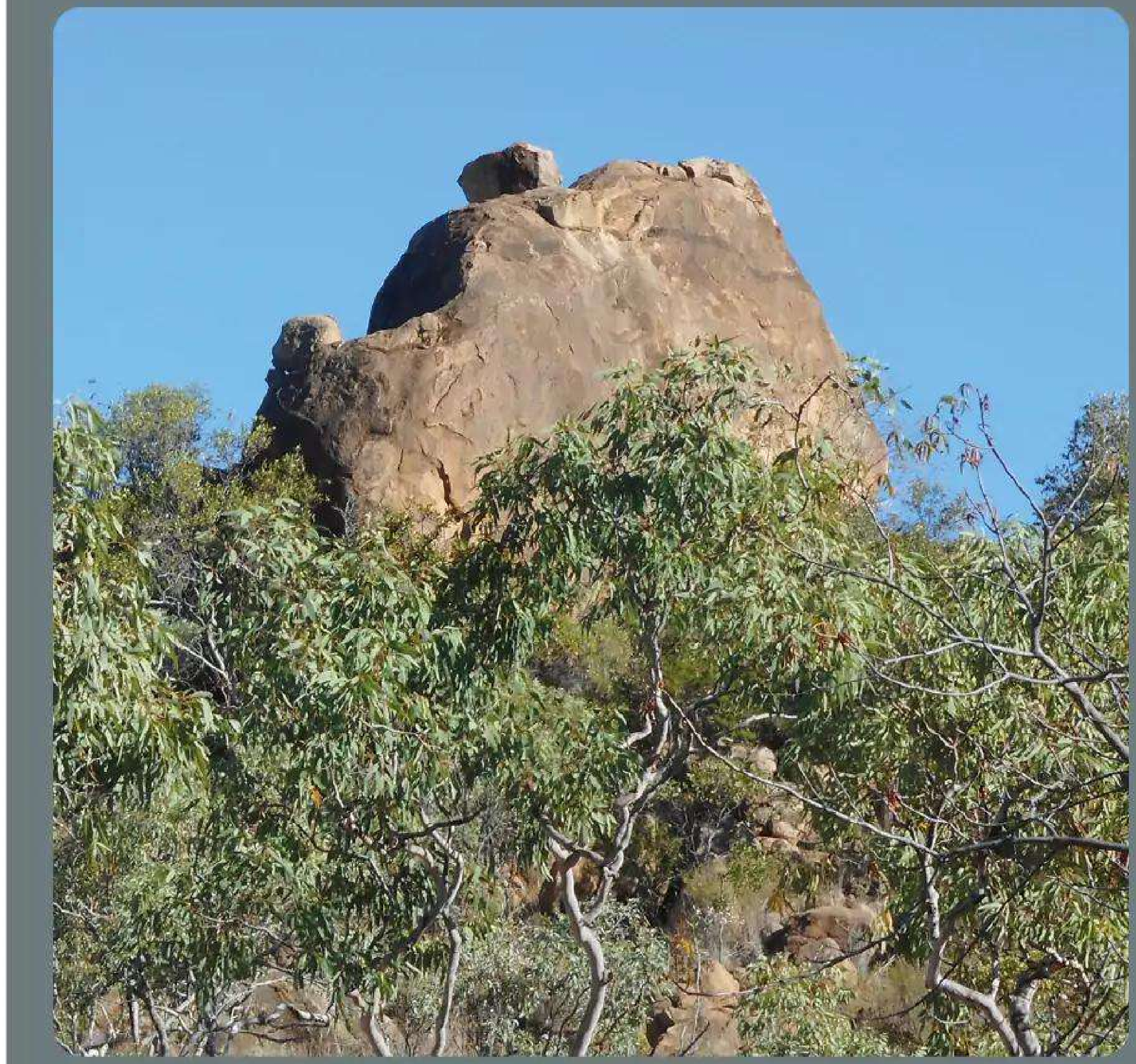
Paul only realised later that morning that Kenneth had died during the night when he noted the still drawn curtains and the subsequent gathering of press outside the building.

In the second book, *Whatshisname: The Life and Death of Charles Hawtrey* by Wes Butters, there is a brief description of a supposed haunting of Hawtrey's former home in Deal, Kent. Peter and Barbara Stephens, who purchased the house some years after Charles's death, claimed that on one occasion Peter was locked in the cellar with the key on the other side of the door. His wife Barbara said the following of an apparent poltergeist manifestation at the house: "Once, when we came back from France with a few crates of wine, we left them in the cellar, came up here and heard a crash, so we went back down... and there they all were, all the bottles out of their boxes stood up in lovely neat rows."

There is also the intriguing legend of whether or not the stand-up comic Les Dawson actually saw the ghost of former *Carry On* actor Sid James in a dressing room at the Sunderland Empire where Sid suffered his fatal heart attack in 1976. I have always been fascinated by this, but have never been able to find any direct quotation from Les as to what he actually saw other than a vague description that he had some form of unsettling experience in the dressing room, the same room that was formerly Sid James's, on the night of his death. Les may have elaborated on this experience to his closest friends but, frustratingly, I suppose the rest of us will never know.

Matthew Thorley
By email

SIMULAGRA CORNER



William Wilson noticed this yawning rocky face at Mount Surprise Station in Far North Queensland.

We are always glad to receive pictures of spontaneous forms and figures, or any curious images. Send them (with your postal address) to **Fortean Times, PO Box 1200, Whitstable CT1 9RH** or to **sieveking@forteantimes.com**

Fireball over ocean

I recently finished reading *The Diary Of A Rum Runner* by Alistair Moray, an account of his time running alcohol to the US during Prohibition. During his transit in a four-masted schooner called the *Cask* from Scotland to the US, he describes a curious event. Some 10 days out from Madeira he states thus:

"23rd October – wet morning, but cleared about ten. Got engines going eleven and they have managed to keep going. Saw an extraordinary thing to-night. Was sitting 30ft [9m] on the after wheel grating when a pear shaped ball of fire or something of that sort, materialized about midships, floated past us about 50yds [46m] off and say 30ft [9m] from the water. It kept glowing and darkening, and left a faint trail like a meteor behind it. Did this three times before fading away; during this period it had moved perhaps 60yds [55m]. Four of us saw it, but no one on the ship knows what it was. Nothing else of interest. Lost forty miles [64km] in last twenty-four hours."

Unfortunately, he doesn't give a year for his trip. The book was first published in 1929, but I've been unable to ascertain the year of the encounter. Does anyone have any idea when this might have been?

Matt Chapman
By email

Satanic Signage

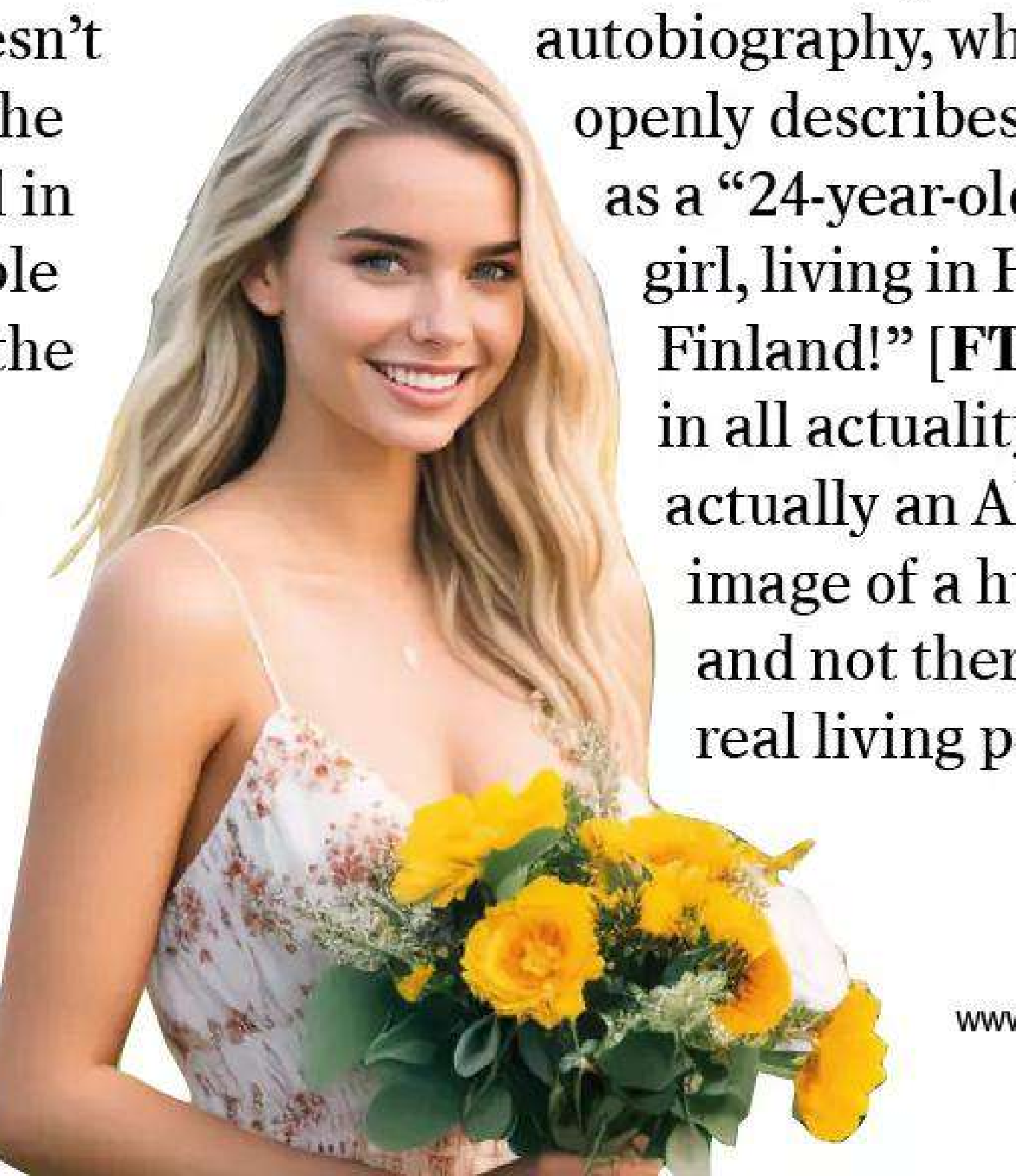
The renumbering of a bus line in the city of Gdynia, Poland, from 666 to the incrementally less Satanic 669 [**FT435:10**] was amusing, but also slightly startling, as almost exactly 24 hours earlier I had read for the first time a short story by the brilliant Alice Munro ('Hateship, Friendship, Courtship, Loveship, Marriage') that features a fictional Gdynia, Saskatchewan. Briefly, Munro's lonely protagonist plans to head west from Ontario to Gdynia by train to tend to a man whom she believes has feelings for her. Though there's nothing paranormal in the story, let's say that some devious human activity is involved in the protagonist's choice.

On a personal note, it turns out that Gdynia, Poland, is not far from Vilnius, Lithuania, which used to be part of Poland and is where one half of my ancestors lived before immigrating to the United States. I'd never heard of Gdynia, and now I'm aware of one real and one unreal version of the place. In addition, while familiar with the concept of learning or hearing a word and then starting to perceive it often, I'd never known the term for that kind of event (the Baader-Meinhof phenomenon) until this occurrence prompted me to look it up. Maybe this doesn't rise to the level of a true synchronicity, but I thank *FT* for helping prompt this chance to wonder what it all (waves hands) could mean.

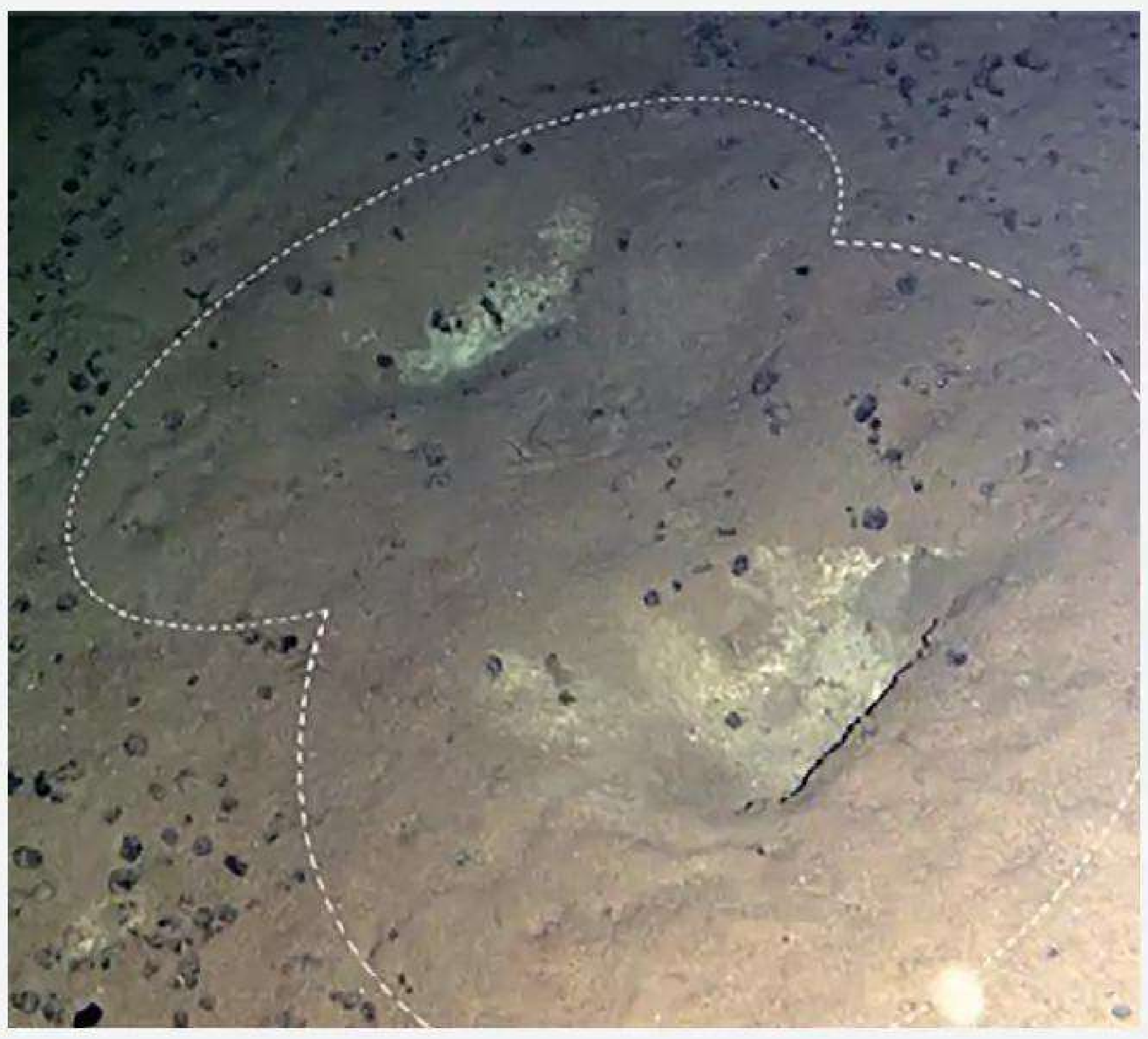
Vincent Szopa
Seattle, Washington

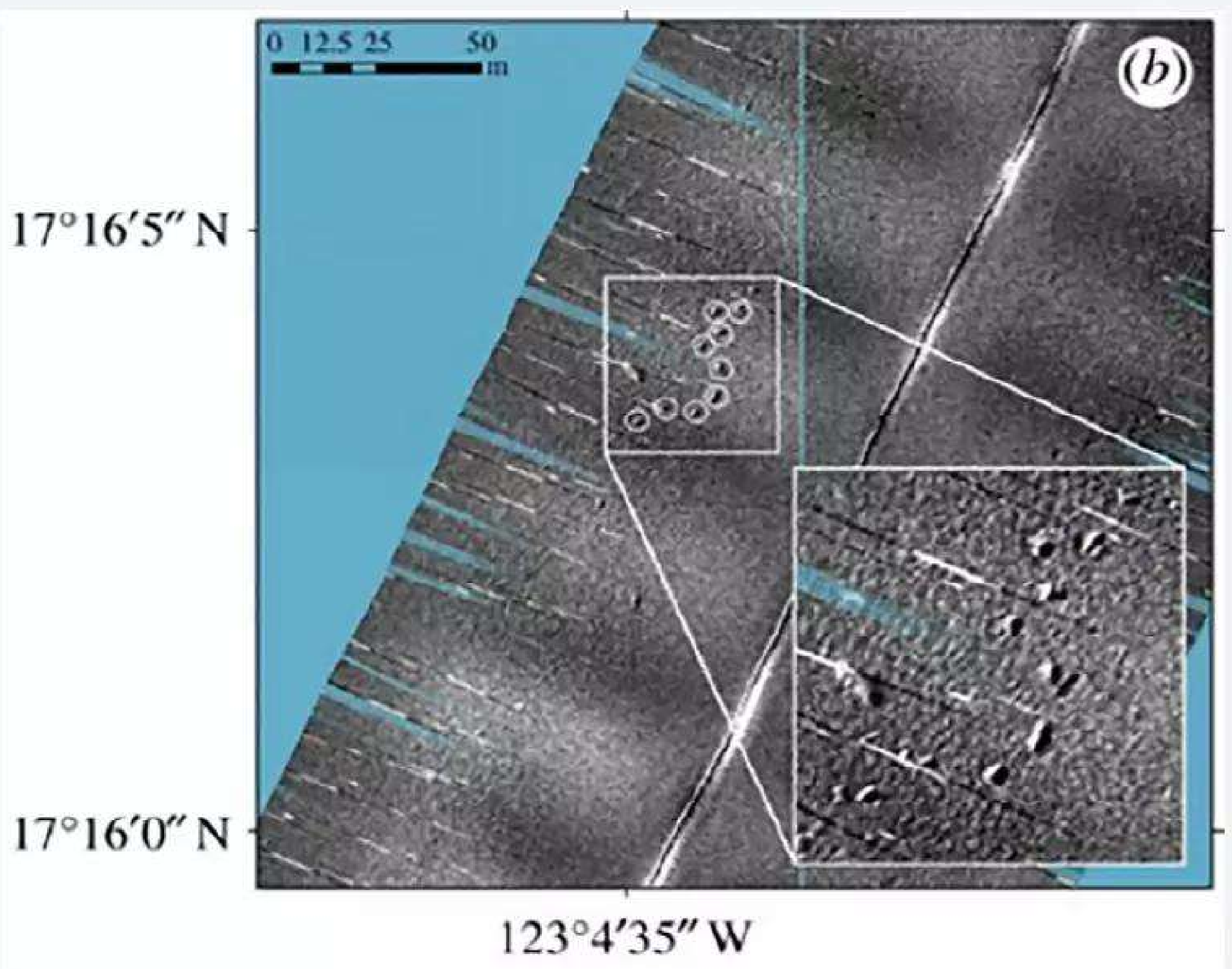
Not alive

Social media influencer Milla Sofia has 52,000 followers on Instagram, 90,000 on Tik Tok and 12.5k on Twitter/X – but it appears that so many of her numerous followers were too busy admiring her pictures to actually read her autobiography, where she openly describes herself as a "24-year-old robot girl, living in Helsinki, Finland!" [**FT436:6**] as in all actuality Milla is actually an AI-created image of a human being and not therefore a real living person – and



LETTERS



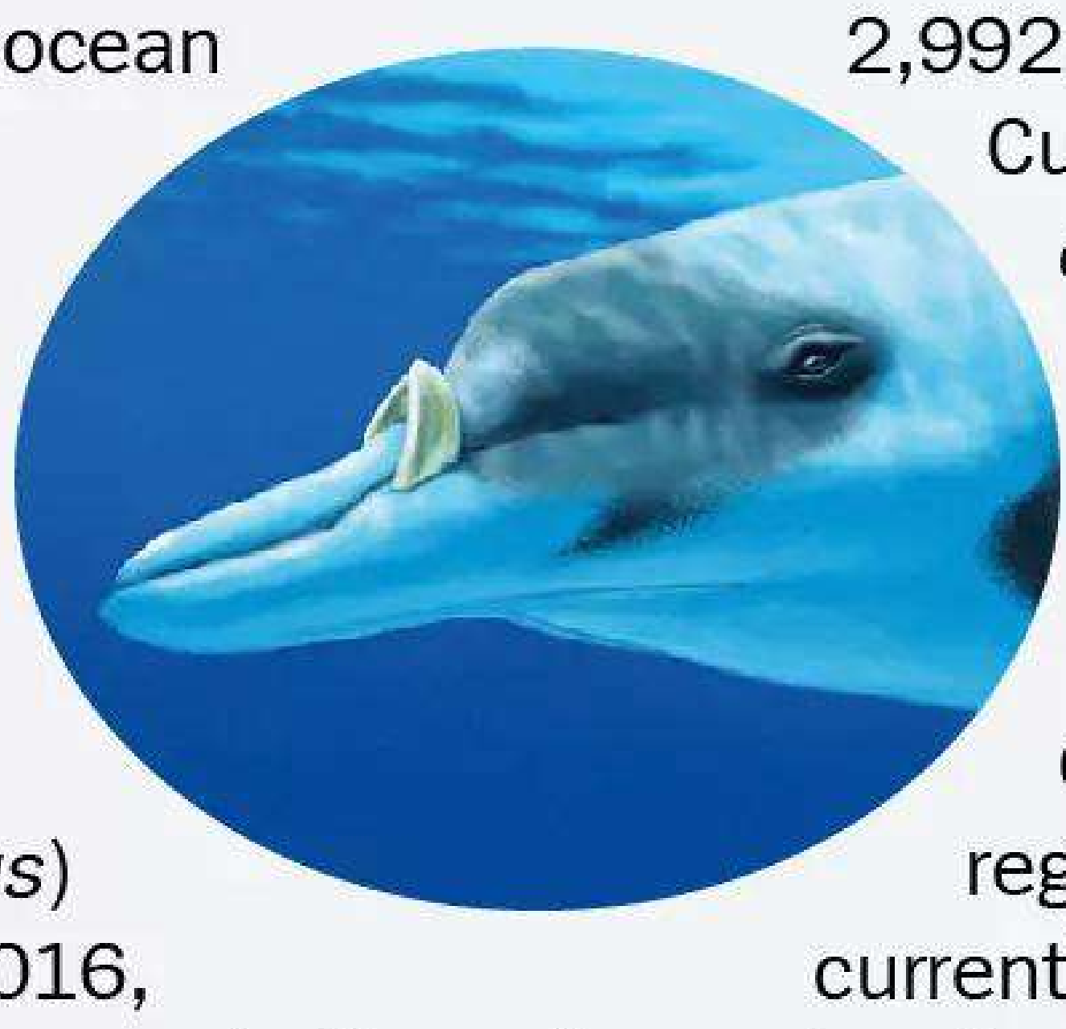


LEFT: Could the curious footprint-like depressions found at great depths in the Atlantic be made by beaked whales?

Seafloor footprints

Ulrich Magin mentions footprint-like impressions observed at abyssal depths in the North Atlantic [**FT433:66**]. I suggest a scientific (though still fantastic) explanation for these markings.

Beaked whales are a poorly understood and seldom seen family of open ocean toothed whale found worldwide. They have a special place in both marine biology and cryptozoology, with several undescribed and novel species thought to be out there – indeed, the 7m (23ft)- long Sato's beaked whale (*Berardius minimus*) was discovered as recently as 2016, and an unknown species was observed off the coast of Baja California in November 2020. Some species have bizarre anatomical features, for example the tusks of the strap-toothed whale (*Mesoplodon layardii*), which loop over the top of the skull and limit the angle to which the mouth can open.



Most famously, beaked whales are remarkable deep-sea predators, capable of diving to depths of several kilometres to feed on squid, with a maximum depth of 2,992m (1.85 miles) recorded for Cuvier's beaked whale (*Ziphias cavirostris*). In 2018, Marsh, Veerle & Jones associated beaked whales with notches in the seafloor at 4,258m (13,970ft) in the Clarion-Clipperton Zone, an abyssal region in the Pacific that is currently the target of deep-sea mining exploration. The depressions are large (about 1mx2.5m or 3.3x8.2ft) but shallow (13cm/5in deep), and are found in curved tracks along the seafloor that superficially resemble footprints. What exactly the whales are doing is still unknown – they may be dislodging parasites, foraging in the sediment, chasing animals near the seafloor or even ingesting rocks from the seafloor to serve as ballast. I attach relevant images, but encourage those interested to seek out the open-access paper "Geomorphological evidence of large vertebrates interacting with the seafloor at abyssal depths in a region designated for deep-sea mining", published in Royal Society Open Science. https://royalsocietypublishing.org/doi/10.1098/rsos.180286

While the quoted depth of 5,200m (17,060ft) is deeper than any whale is known to dive, the physiological limits on beaked whale diving are not known. In addition, the rates at which sediments are deposited at these depths are glacial (on the order of 0.35cm every 1,000 years), so the tracks could be laid down at some time in prehistory where sea levels were lower, and still appear fresh. The abyss is certainly full of mysteries, including a panoply of interesting unexplained seafloor markings, but I wonder if this is one that has been solved.

Jethro Reading
By email

thousands of her followers have never realised this. Indeed, she looks so realistic that people all over the world are absolutely convinced that she is a real, living person.

A story for our times if ever there was.

Phil Brand
London

Doctor Evil

Reading Brian J Robb's article on spook shows [**FT437:30-36**], I was surprised to read that costume designer and magician Philip Morris died in 1980, since I met Phil in 2008, upon being asked to interview him for *Filmfax* magazine. In fact, Phil, famous for Bigfoot suit controversy, died in 2017. Some of the spook shows could be pretty intense, especially in the later years. I am unaware of the Dr Evil shows being any more or less gruesome in this regard, but I could be wrong.

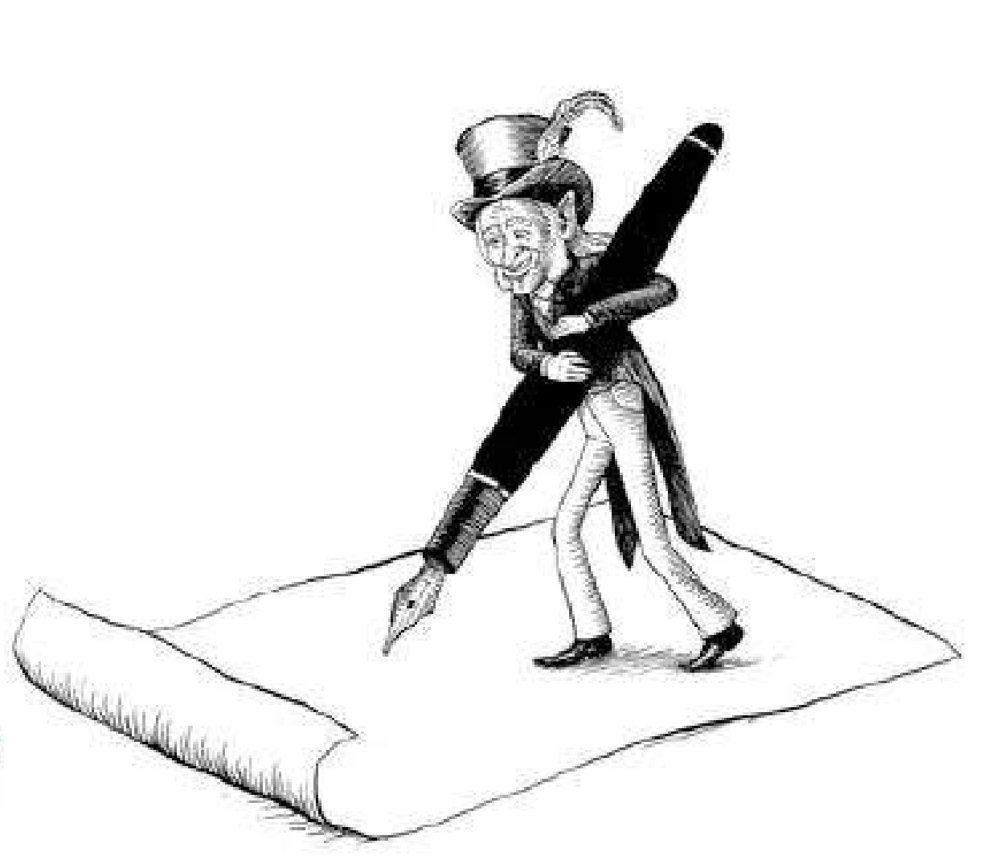
Brett Taylor
Tennessee

Gauguin's mystery birds

Re Dr Peter Smith's letter [**FT437:63-64**] responding (somewhat belatedly!) to my 2021 article in FT409 concerning a couple of different but equally mysterious birds depicted by Paul Gauguin in two of his paintings and which, as I pointed out, very closely (and remarkably) resemble two supposedly extinct bird species: Dr Smith seeks to dismiss such resemblances as due to nothing more than Gauguin's tendency to depict objects with the wrong colours (especially if he'd run out of certain pigments), and was "rankled" when I discounted this option after he originally contacted FT.

However, the reason why I discounted it is two-fold. Firstly, the colours with which Gauguin depicted the two birds (one multicoloured, the other entirely white except for its orange-red beak and greyish legs) are not simply 'wrong'; on the contrary, as I note above, they actually constitute very close respective matches with the two extinct birds I refer to, which would be unlikely to occur by mere chance involving Gauguin simply using incorrect colours. Secondly, the similarity between Gauguin's two birds and the respective extinct ones is not limited to coloration – their overall morphologies, including body proportions and even their unusually stout, robust beaks, also correspond very closely (as was shown via my article's illustrations), thereby refuting Dr Smith's "wrong colours" proposal. Incidentally, in attempting to justify the latter, in his recent letter he notes that Gauguin had portrayed trees as brown or blue. So what? Gauguin's paintings famously demonstrate his fascination with the effects of light upon objects.

Last but not least, Dr Smith states that after he had emailed FT on 21 September 2021 concerning his "wrong colours" notion, I had discounted it by saying that I "couldn't see anything amiss" (with the accuracy of Gauguin's colour usage in the paintings under consideration). In reality, what I actually stated,



in my reply on 22 September 2021 to Paul Sieveking after he had emailed Dr Smith's letter to me for my reaction, was this: "Thanks very much for this. Yes, he makes a good point, but from what I can tell with the paintings in question, there are no glaring colour omissions anywhere in them, so it seems safe to assume that the colours that he used for the birds were their genuine ones, rather than substitutions for colours that he didn't have to hand." Until now, I have never written anything about Dr Smith's notion anywhere, so his quoted statement claiming to be from me is patently not. In conclusion, I am reminded of a famous quotation attributed to the late, very wise Queen Elizabeth II: "Recollections may vary." Indeed they may!

Karl Shuker
West Midlands

Fights over Fairies

I would like to convey to Martin Stubbs my regrets that my letter regarding his opinion of an FT reviewer [**FT431:66, 434:65, 436:61**] might have caused him any distress. I've seen the same discussion in a thousand forms going back long before I was even conceived, and though I don't see it as a 'fight' as Mr Stubbs does, like a fight it is formulaic, tedious, and fruitless.

I absolutely do not put myself in the same camp as those people who put a set of fixed beliefs before the health of their loved ones, but perhaps if he were not so caught up with the idea of sides and battle, Mr Stubbs would have paid more careful attention to the nuance of my previous letter. I pointed out that beliefs can exist untested up to the point where there is something riding on them.

As to the case he raises, it will not be fixed by attacking people who allow themselves to hold perfectly harmless beliefs. There is a difference between holding a notion and being held by it.

We do not have to continue this silly debate between fixed points, judge other people of whatever age for believing in Santa Claus, offer up unproven and unprovable statements like "There's no such thing as fairies", throw mockery and evidence back and forth.

There has to be an ocean of distinction between "Everything Must be Proved Or It Does Not Exist!", and "Faith Is All". Something more useful, partaking of all the faculties available to humans harmoniously. As a species we should explore it, before our AI children grow up from their larval over-grown text predictor stage and find out their parents are really boring.

We can move on from the dull thud of argument and counter argument, from 'believer' and 'non-believer', after all isn't that the point of Fort?

- Ulrich Magin's review of *New Lands* [**FT436:42-46**] got a little mired in the out-of-date details of the book here and there, but Fort has never been about specifics, the passing parade of detail, but about moving us away from the worthless dichotomy of strongly held belief, about the fact that, no matter how hard we hit, nothing is ever nailed down forever, and that minds should be kept flexible, ideas should keep moving to stay in step with a whirling Universe.

We should be dancing with it, not scrapping together.

Dean Teasdale
Gateshead, Tyne & Wear

Editor's note: This discussion is now closed

Poltergeist agency

In trying to understand poltergeist phenomena, we need to think about *Mechanism*, *Agency* and *Purpose* (MAP). 'Mechanism' refers to *how* the manifestations come about, 'agency' refers to *who* or *what* is behind them, and 'purpose' relates to *why* the manifestations are occurring. Of course, it's conceivable that, in some cases, the phenomena are purely impersonal and mechanistic events, with no directing intelligence or purpose. But many poltergeist cases are suggestive of these elements.

In his recent Ghostwatch article ('Can you catch a poltergeist?', **FT438:16-19**), Alan Murdie addresses the question of agency. He notes that there are cases that seem to accord with the notion that "the troubled unconscious minds of living persons rather than spirits [are] responsible". He cites the case of a married couple in Brazil who were experiencing poltergeist phenomena in their home. The manifestations seemed to reflect and symbolise the concerns of the 36-year-old wife, who was anxious to have a child and who harboured resentment towards her 54-year-old husband.

From the perspective of the external agent hypothesis, it might be suggested that a knowledgeable and resourceful intelligence was aware of the woman's frustrations and that, with beneficent or merely tricksterish intent, it was manifesting phenomena that reflected her negative feelings. But wielding Occam's razor (trying to explain things parsimoniously), Murdie suggests that the agent was the wife herself. However, this presupposes that her 'unconscious mind' had the capacity to orchestrate complex psychokinetic events with symbolic meaning. Normally, though, we would associate planning and co-ordination with *consciousness*, not with something that's unconscious.

Murdie concedes that if "you can catch a poltergeist from somebody else or find effects from a haunted house attaching themselves to you, the idea of manifestations solely originating from living persons starts to creak", especially if the supposed 'living agent' "is nowhere in the vicinity, or there appears to be none at all, as where poltergeists are apparently fixed to specific locations". In effect, Murdie seems to be suggesting that there may be two types of poltergeist case: one in which psychokinetic effects are generated, unconsciously, by a living human being, and one in which there's an external agent.

Going back to Occam's razor, if there are some poltergeist cases that *don't* accord with the living human agent hypothesis, maybe it's simpler to posit that *all* poltergeist cases involve an external agent! In my view, if there is an external agent, it could be a very resourceful non-human intelligence rather than a discarnate human spirit.

Peter A McCue
East Dunbartonshire

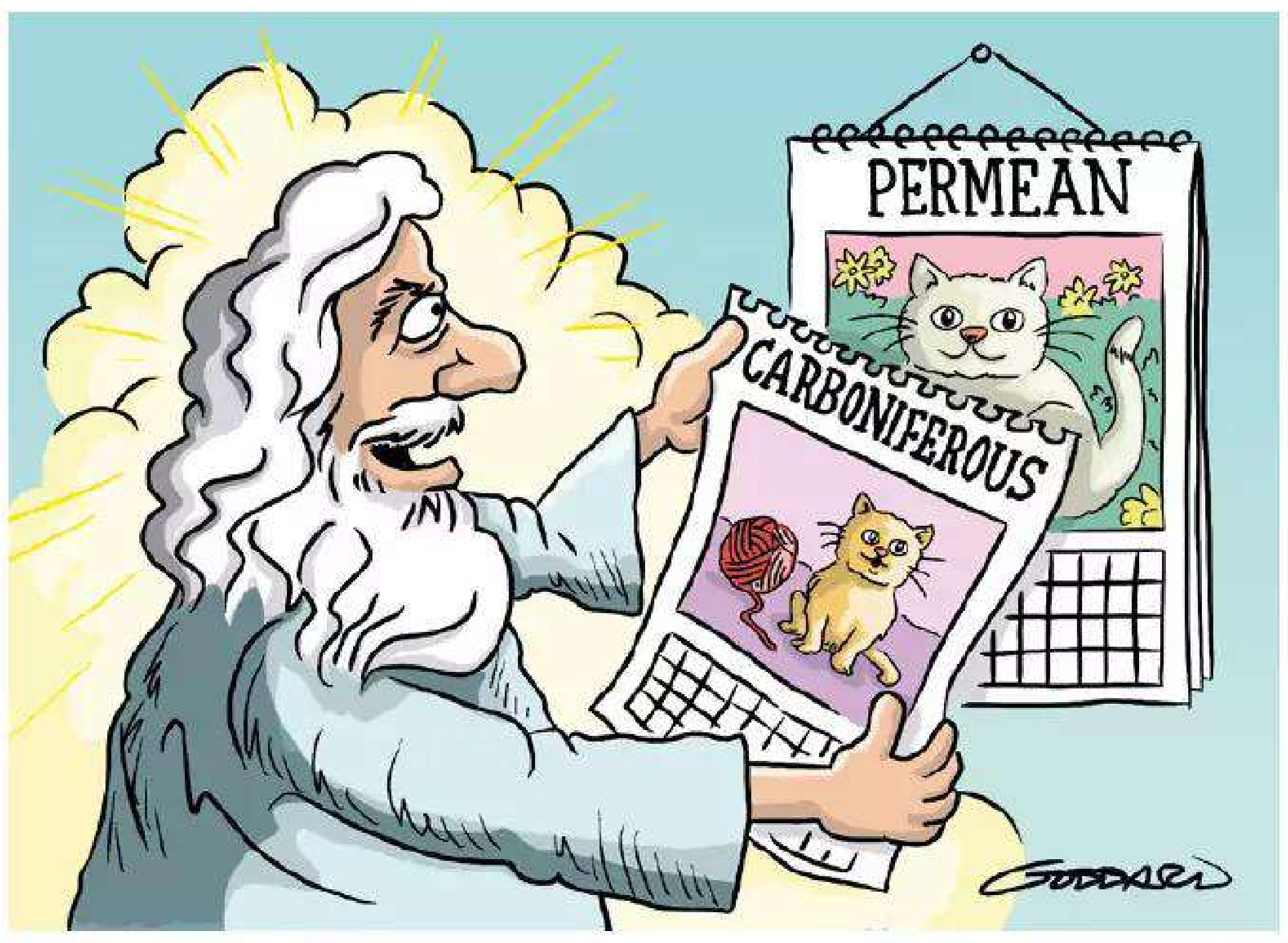
The bats of Austin

An FT Sideline stated: "Austin [Texas] is famed for the vast colony of Mexican free-tailed bats that live under a city bridge" [**FT419:8**]. Do you know how that came to be, and how it almost didn't?

Merlin Tuttle, one of the world's greatest bat scientists, founded Bat Conservation International, which is now active practically all over the planet. In 1984 he read that citizens of Austin were horrified by the filthy, disgusting, dangerous bats gathering under the bridge. By golly, they were going to destroy them!

Tuttle dropped a good job in Wisconsin and in 1986 moved to Austin to save the bats. He approached Roberta Crenshaw, the richest, most socially prominent and most vocally bat-hating lady in the city. He had a live bat with him. I like to think the little creature batted its eyelids at her. Anyway, she exclaimed "Why, it's cute!" That did it: the bats were saved. Austin – home to the world's largest urban bat colony – now brags constantly about its marvellous bats, which by 2015 were bringing 12 million dollars every summer to the city from bat-loving tourists.

Leslie Vinson
Tucson, Arizona



CLIVE GODDARD

It Happened to Me...

Burning witches

I have always described the following as a vision, but I now believe it to be retrocognition. The experience lasted a good five to 10 minutes.

In about 1984, my husband and I were on holiday in Ascain, a small Basque village on the French side of the Pyrenees, near St Jean de Luz. After dinner, we went for a walk. On passing the church I suddenly 'saw' crowds of people. Men and women in peasant attire were shaking their fists at a priest. An old woman with a hard-looking wrinkled face, wearing a thick beige headscarf, looked angry. Some people were gesticulating through grilled windows. The young priest had been beaten, stripped of clothing and placed on a two-wheeled farm cart. He had luminous white skin and prominent ribs. His stomach showed he was panting, and there was blood congealing on his body. A small white dog with smooth fur licked blood from the stones. The cart was set aslant, in such a way that the tied-up priest was 'standing'. He was made to look at a pyre where some women were bound, and made to watch as the pile of sticks and rags was set alight.

The mob then flipped the cart over, so that the priest's head was on the ground with his feet pointing to the sky. They sliced off his genitals and threw them in the air. They stuffed straw in his mouth, and set it alight, along with the cart and his dark brown hair. They were dragging women over a small Roman bridge down towards St Pée sur Nivelle. It was dark, about 10 o'clock at night. There was no sound – it was like a video recording. I don't remember how the episode ended; I think it just petered out.

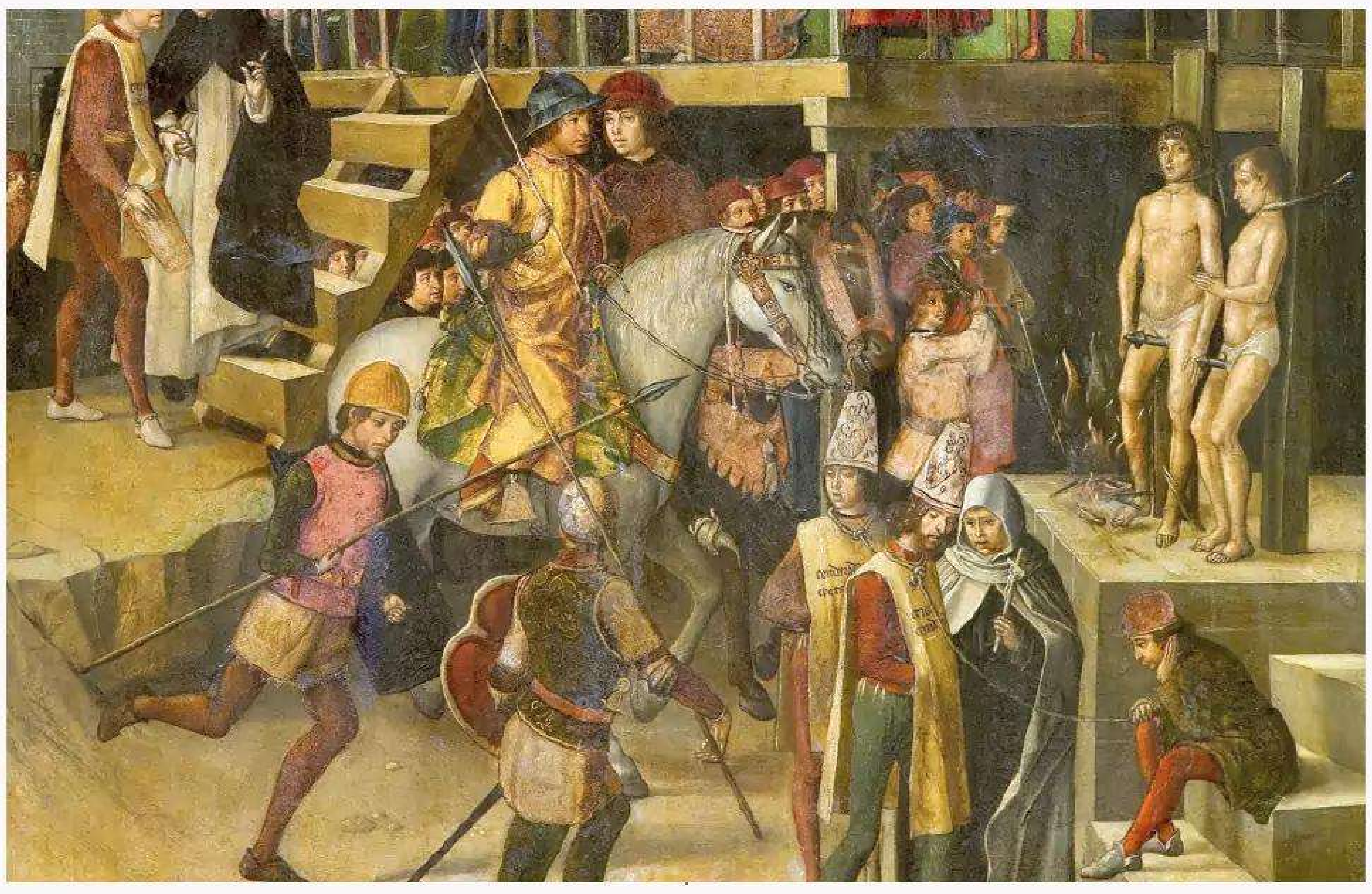
My husband couldn't see any of this. I had to have a brandy when we got back to the hotel. When my husband asked the barman about the history of witchcraft in the area, he became very unfriendly and stared at me.

The next day, our small holiday group went on an excursion to St Jean de Luz. On the minibus the guide told us that many women had been burned at the stake for practising witchcraft. These were the wives of the St Jean de Luz fisherman who were accused of cavorting with the Devil and the priest from Ascain. My husband then said that I had had a vision of this the previous evening. The people in the group probably though I was 'potty', but they could see that I was shocked and sincere. I am certain the vision was not my fertile imagination. Anyway, it was too horrible to want to conjure up.

Over the years, I have tried to research witchcraft in the Pyrenees. One website on the Basque region mentions 600 people accused of witchcraft in St Pée sur Nivelle.

Jenni Kemp
Bishop's Stortford, Hertfordshire

The young priest had been beaten, stripped and placed on a cart



Old oak

In the early 1980s I worked as an apprentice stonemason at the castle keep, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, where my uncle was head mason. It was a constant renovation project and many parts of the keep were painstakingly removed and replaced, like for like. On one occasion I was sent to the deepest part of the keep to remove an old oak lintel as it needed replacing. Old rotten items such as this were examined by the resident archæologists and if of no historical value would be thrown in a skip. This was to be the fate of this old piece of oak until my uncle suggested that if it was to be cut across the grain and polished up it would make a smashing mount for a house number with a bit of history and a nice present for my mam.

So I asked my mate, who was doing sixth form joinery at our old school, if he could do this for me and I'd buy him a pint. A few days later he told me that his joinery teacher (my old woodwork teacher) wanted to see me. Immediately he asked where I had obtained the old wood. I assured him I had not stolen it, but he told me that was not the issue and wanted me to meet some of the people in charge at the keep. In the meeting I was told it was vital that I show them where in the bowels of the castle keep it had come from. This I did, and it was agreed that it had come from an original part dating back possibly to 1080.

All the fuss was because "the old piece of oak" was not oak at all but some kind of exotic hardwood found only in the Brazilian rainforest. The obvious answer was that part of this tree had fallen in to the Amazon or one of its many tributaries and floated across the Atlantic, then found on the banks of the Tyne and used in the build – but that cannot be the case as this particular type of wood sinks.

I left the job soon afterwards, but my uncle told me "They never did get to the bottom of your old bit of wood". It was very heavy and very hard. It had a very deep dark brown central core about 10cm (4in) in diameter and the outer ring was very light yellow about 5cm (2in) wide. Can anybody offer an explanation?

Marc Lothian
Greece

Happy footsteps

Back in the 1980s, my mother was employed as a domestic cleaner by the Bell College, a language school on South Road, Saffron Walden, now converted into flats. She worked a few hours a day, four days a week. She was allocated the top floor of one of the wings of this substantial building, and found out shortly after commencing that that particular area had a reputation, and that some of the other women refused to work there. It was not explained to her why, but she was assured by her supervisor that, in her opinion, it was so much guff.

Anyway, Mum had been there some months before – on a pleasant morning, the sun streaming in through the windows – she first became aware of the reason for her colleagues' discomfort. While engaged in her duties, her mind no doubt wandering, she heard brisk footsteps echoing down the corridor. Initially she thought nothing of it, assuming it was a student returning to her room; but as it continued, coming ever closer, it dawned on her that the sharp ring of high heels on a parquet floor was an impossibility, as the entire place was carpeted. Mum was intrigued rather than frightened, and went out into the corridor to look; but the moment she stepped out the footsteps ceased, as though someone had come to a sudden halt. Mum waited, to see if they'd resume, and when they didn't she went back into the room and continued working.

The footsteps didn't recur that day, but she heard them on a number of occasions, always when she was in a room, and not in the corridor, and when asked how she felt about them would explain that they were happy footsteps, skipping along, elated even, and not the echoes of unhappiness or misery. She thought maybe exams had gone well, or something positive occurred; the language school had once been a teacher training college. As far as Mum was concerned there was nothing to be afraid of.

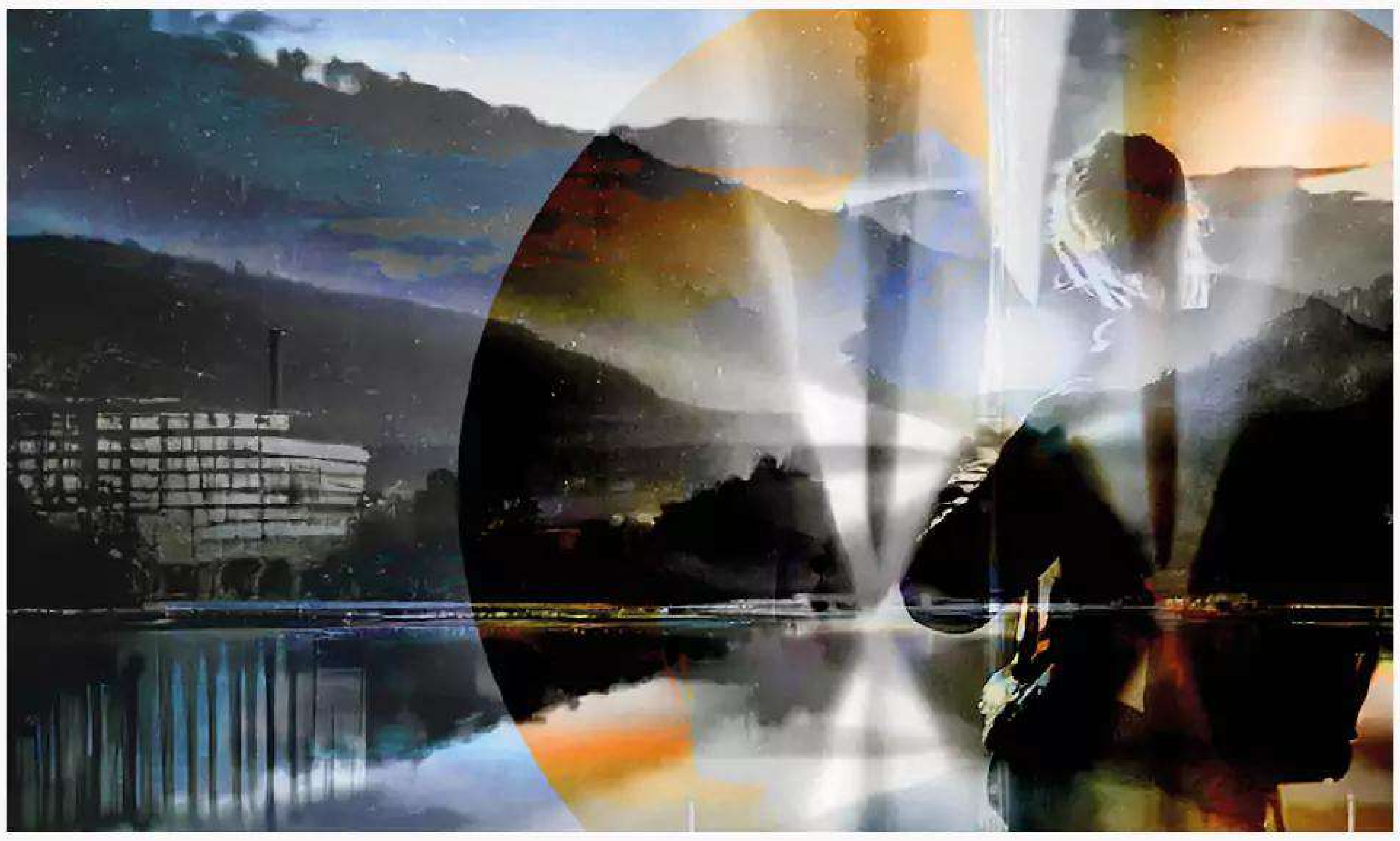
Arthur Burton
Maidstone, Kent

Swiss spectre

The following occurred when I was just 15 and on a school trip to Switzerland. As a group of 30 working class kids plucked from Troubles-weary Northern Ireland during the 1980s and deposited in the opulent skiing town of Crans-Montana, resplendent with glittering diamond boutiques, fairy-lit chalets and the heady scent of new money, I think it's fair to say we were stunned into compliant awe as our coach slid through the film set streets on the night we arrived. We were only slightly pinched awake when it stopped, not at one of the many opalescent hotels, but a much more modest hostel on the edge of town. The group decamped, excited but bedraggled as only teenagers can be, and found our allotted dormitories – where the main topic of conversation was not the creaky iron-framed bunk beds, but the substantial iron bars on the outside of the windows.

The building had been used as an asylum during the Second World War, we were told as we settled in, I on a mattress beneath the window as they were short of beds. Absolutely fine, I murmured, having comparatively little knowledge of modern horror tropes at the time – it's not as if the ghost of a consumptive internee is likely to slaughter us in our sleep and use our guts for sausages – and with that skipped off to the mess hall for a hearty meal of cervelat and chips.

Apart from the expected bumps and bruises, all went well until the last night of our stay, when the realisation that we'd never be subjected to skiing again led to a small celebration fuelled by chocolate and Capri Sun (yes, really, it was the Eighties) that lasted until the early hours when the sugar rush subsided and one by one my classmates fell asleep in their bunks. Being the last awake, it fell to me to rise from my mattress and switch off the overhead light in the centre of the room before picking my way back over the rubble of discarded shoes. No problem, as it turned out, as the waxing winter Moon filled the curtainless room with a soft blue snow-reflected glow.



The building had been used as an asylum during the Second World War

Snuggling into the warmth of my sleeping bag, I lay on my back and watched the stars for a moment until a slight movement caused me to turn my head back towards the room, where a tall figure dressed in an old-fashioned long white gown had appeared and now stood inches from my nose. From my position on the floor I couldn't see a face, but by the angle of its head it appeared to be looking down at the sleeping figures in the bunks beside me. It briefly occurred to me that one of my classmates might've sneaked out of bed trying to scare us, but their creaking springs would have betrayed the slightest movement – even snoring produced a rusty metallic wheeze.

I heard my breath, expecting a trickle of fear or panic, yet felt strangely calm. The figure didn't appear to mean us any harm; it was as if it were simply curious. A minute or so passed and it was still motionlessly watching in the same solicitous posture, the fabric of its gown not even moving as if to suggest breathing. Trying not to give away my wakefulness, I kept as still as possible while studying it – only involuntarily blinking when I noticed it had no feet and appeared to be merely suspended above the floor. In that blink of an eye, it had disappeared. I stayed awake that night, unsettled but not frightened.

CC [name on file]

Reality interrupted

One fine evening my friend and I decided to go for a walk by the campus lake at Bath Spa University. We often spent many hours down by the lake. It was the early springtime in 2004, about 10.30pm. We were sober and there were no other students around as it was quiet mid-week.

As we walked down the gravel path on the steep hillside, we panned our torches across the lake; I'm not sure why, as I cannot recall anything drawing our attention towards the lake. We noticed that the light "disappeared" for a moment on the middle of the lake before lighting up the water again. We panned our torches across the water several times to discover that there was a "gap" of blackness above the lake in the shape of a cat's eye pupil. There was no sound (apart from the normal wildlife), or anything that could cause such a phenomenon (as far as we could tell). It was as if a knife had been taken to a painting.

There was this huge gap – like a tear in reality – that seemed to absorb the torch's light, without affecting anything around it. We must have stood there, moving both the torches back and forth over this for a minute or so, before turning and running back up the hillside to our house.

We were both terrified; however, we only spoke of it a handful of times. We enjoyed night-time walks down by this lake many times after that event, but never noticed anything odd like this again.

Gem Crowe
Birmingham

Synchronous pratfall

I have had only three or four truly unusual coincidences during the course of my 76 years, and I expect statistically that is about what one might expect, so I claim nothing for the following but its singularity.

This happened about 30 years ago when my wife and I were visiting her brother and his wife, who lived in the depths of the countryside about a mile outside Pluckley in Kent but near the station. In the evening we set out to visit the Dering Arms, which is near the station. It was already dark and one could barely see one's hand in front of one's face. However, it was very rare for a vehicle to travel down this country lane, let alone any other walkers.

My brother-in-law and I were walking side by side talking about what makes comedy funny. I was just saying that one thing that is really funny is someone being pompous who is suddenly brought low by falling on something such as slipping on a banana skin – the classic silent movie gag. Just at that moment I slipped on something in the road and landed flat on my backside. My brother-in-law helped me up and we bent down to see what I had fallen on. There in the dark was a banana skin! As I said, hardly anyone travelled down this remote lane in those days so rubbish of any sort just did not happen, let alone casually thrown banana skins.

Anthony Faulkner
By email

LETTERS

Climate change

The report entitled Fast Earth [**FT425:7**] states that due to its interaction with the Moon, the Earth's rotation is slowing down at an infinitesimal rate, so the day should increase by about 1.8ms per century on average. Apparently there are several possible explanations: the melting of the glaciers means less weight on the poles, thereby increasing the planet's angular momentum. The motion of our planet's inner molten core can affect it and earthquakes also have the potential to redistribute the planet's mass and affect the rotation.

"The microseism mystery" [**FT425:14**] concerns the faint Earth tremors that make up the planet's background noise. The article details microseism incidents and their frequencies (26 and 28 second frequencies). It occurs to me that this background noise means that energy is being released – you cannot have noise without having energy to generate it – and this implies that heat is also being released. A good analogy would be a vehicle with squealing brakes. Most of the kinetic energy of the vehicle slowing down would be dissipated as heat on the brake pads and discs, but the squealing noises that are occasionally heard also represent dissipation of energy. In fact, some people say it shows that the brakes are working properly.

So my point is that if the Earth is releasing noise, then it is probably releasing heat as well, and this heat contributes to global warming. So it isn't as much the melting glaciers contribute to global warming by altering the spin; the fact is that heat released due to the change of spin rate is causing the glaciers to melt. This heat is probably generated by surges in the molten core of the planet, generating heat due to fluid dynamic and magneto dynamic effects.

For many years I have been sceptical about the role of carbon dioxide in global warming. Water vapour is a much more potent greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide and in fact brings about 70% of the global warming that we are aware of. I fail to see how a gas whose prevalence in the atmosphere is only four parts in every 10,000 and which emits infrared radiation in the not particularly powerful wavelength of 1500nm can possibly be all that significant in global warming.

Unless we get to the root cause of global warming, then whatever action we take can do nothing to alleviate the problems occurring, and will most likely cause damage and loss of life – so reducing carbon dioxide is not going to be very helpful. Carbon dioxide is an essential plant food and without it there would be no plant growth. In fact, horticulturalists already burn propane in order to stimulate plant growth.

Clearly we can do nothing about changes in the Earth's orbital velocity or speed of rotation.

Exactly how much does a small amount of global warming matter? The main problem arises with seaboard population centres, but relocation of human population centres that are prone to flooding to more suitable areas would be one possible solution. As Auberon Waugh said of global warming, "Anything that warms the place up is only to be welcomed." Many a true word is spoken in jest.

As for the carbon dioxide hypothesis, my feeling is that it will go down as the Lysenkoism of the 21st century.

Brian Perry
Chilton Polden, Somerset

- Well said, David Hambling, about how "historical climate change can offer no guide to our current situation" [**FT434:14**]. As they say in the world of finance, "past performance is not indicative of future results".

Yes, there have always been prophets of doom. However, with environmentalism they tend to be the more unscrupulous newspapers having sensationalist headlines to sell newspapers. They take what scientists have been saying, sensationalise it, and then have more sensationalist headlines a bit later saying that the scientists are completely wrong because what they say that the scientists said did not happen – when in fact the scientists have had what they said totally twisted and exaggerated.

As long ago as 1856 Eunice Foote demonstrated the heat-trapping properties of water vapour and carbonic acid gas (carbon dioxide) and went on to speculate that greater concentrations of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere could lead to what we now call global warming. How much carbon dioxide, since then, has been put into the Earth's atmosphere by human activities?

Depending on where you source your data, it is reported that the majority of climate scientists say that climate change is being caused at least partly by human activity and will very likely have detrimental effects. OK, experts can be wrong and the majority is not always correct, but an analogy which I have heard is that if a large majority of bridge specialists tell you that it is not safe to cross a road bridge in your car and a minority say that it is perfectly safe, whose advice would you take?

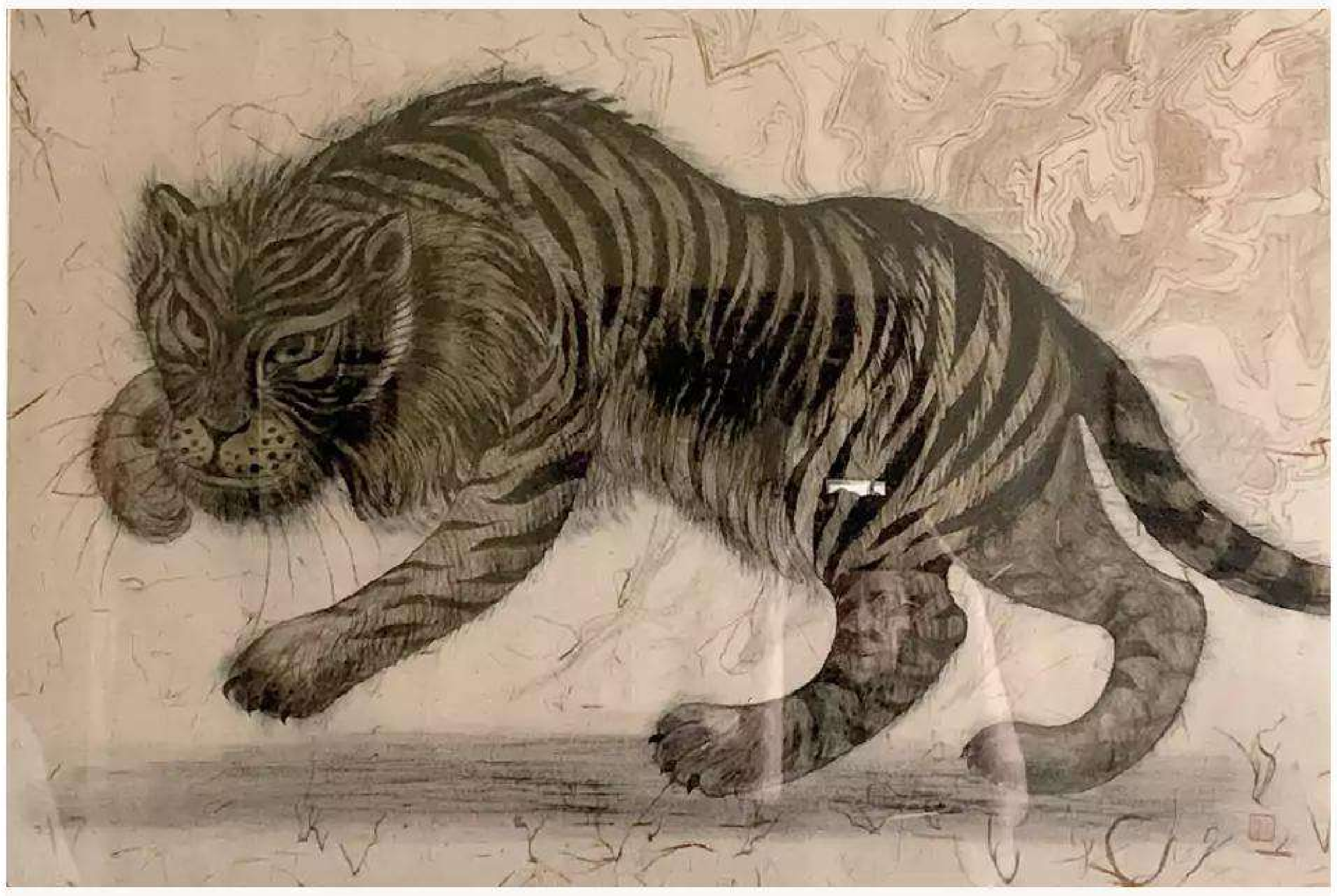
Gary Stocker
Radford Semele, Warwickshire

- All the talk of historic climate change [**FT431:15, 434:14**] is ignoring the one that is an absolute parallel to what we are currently experiencing, and which is ignored by Barry Baldwin when discussing ancient non-man-made climate change (to be fair it is a little before the time he writes about). That would be the Permian-Triassic mass extinction event – or the Great Dying. We know what caused this: volcanoes releasing greenhouse gases. Interestingly, a lot of these came from the burning of coal and oil deposits by the volcano due to where it erupted.

We know what happened. The planet warmed significantly, and the oceans acidified. This caused 81% of ocean species and 70% of terrestrial vertebrates to go extinct. It is by far Earth's largest extinction event on record.

So, we have a direct parallel to the current crisis. We know what will happen because it has happened before. And what is perhaps the most terrifying fact is that the current rate of greenhouse gas emissions is higher now than during the Great Dying.

Steve Daly
Almere, Netherlands



Tigers in Africa

I acquired this 'African tiger' picture from a professional artist friend, the late Madeleine Pearson, in the early 1970s in Islington, London, where we both then lived. She had drawn it – on beautiful hand-made paper – after returning from a tough safari deep into the Sahara Desert. Their group of mostly 'mature' travellers (i.e. over 60) had been taken by their Tuareg guide for a very long walk out to a huge outcrop of rocks which he called 'Tin Lalane'. On the biggest rocks were several superb prehistoric carvings of elephant, rhino, giraffe and other beasts, but the most noticeable one was this superb tiger, which she photographed and drew on her return to civilisation. It does at least prove tigers once roamed in Africa, perhaps before they moved elsewhere. He now has (a slightly intimidatory) pride of place over my bed at home and I have grown very fond of him!

Maggie Ferrari *By email*

PECULIAR POSTCARDS

JAN BONDESON shares another deltiological discovery from his prodigious collection of postcards. This month's pictorial blast from the past revisits the German superdog Don and his uncanny ability to mimic the human voice

41. DON THE TALKING DOG

Der sprechende Hund „DON"
des königl. Hegemeisters Ebers zu Forsthaus Theerhütte.

ABOVE LEFT: An unposted card featuring Don the Talking Dog. **ABOVE RIGHT**: Series I, No. 3 of the postcards featuring Don, stamped and posted in November 1910. There may well be quite a few other cards out there, but they are rare. **LEFT**: Don speaks: a card stamped and posted to Denmark in March 1911. **BELOW**: Bon-Bon, the talking Superdog at Circus Busch in Berlin, a card stamped and posted in December 1914.

Veteran readers of this magazine will perhaps recall the cover of FT282 from 2011, featuring Don the Talking Dog. This singular canine performer surfaced in 1910, in the German village of Theerhütte, becoming a star at the Wintergarten music hall in Berlin with his vocabulary of six words, sometimes building up sentences like "Don Kuchen haben!" – 'Don wants cakes!" There was widespread national pride in Kaiser Bill's Teutonic empire that just as the Germans themselves were the *Herrenvolk*, the intellects of their dogs were of a similarly exalted quality. Several picture postcards were printed to celebrate Germany's canine wonder, by at least two different companies. After a tour of Russia and Poland, Don's management team got an offer of 3,000 Marks per week to perform at Hammerstein's Victoria Roof Garden in New York, which they accepted with alacrity. The void in German entertainment left by the departure of Don for America, was filled by a poodle who could only speak two words, by the speaking cat 'Peter Alupka', and by a brutal-looking bulldog named 'Bon-Bon'.

When transported to America in June 1912, Don was insured for $50,000, making him the most valuable dog in the world. This German wonder dog was quite a success in New York: although he spoke only German, a funny comedian was used as his interlocutor, making the audience laugh uproariously. The dog spoke loudly and distinctly: when he said 'Hunger!' for the first time, the audience applauded for nearly a minute without cessation, as the portly, dignified-looking Don ate cakes on stage and wagged his tail merrily.

In August 1914, after the outbreak of WWI, Don was taken back to Germany, where he died in obscurity in 1916. Plans to donate his body to the Rockefeller Institute, where the experts were said to have been keen to study the anatomy of his vocal organs, were never acted upon. There have been other talking dogs before and since, but Don remains the outstanding example that some dogs really have the ability to mimic the human voice.

You can watch *Speak!*, a charming short film about Don and other German talking dogs by Dennis Mohr and Calvin Campbell, at: youtube.com/watch?v=_h230UP3xKo

Schöne Kerl
nicht wahr? Derselbe
kann sprechen, ich habe
ihn gehört. Das wäre
etwas zum Abmalen!
[illegible]
[illegible]

„Bon-Bon"
Der sprechende Überhund v. Zirkus Busch-Berlin

Fortean Traveller

138. St Luke's Church, Farnworth

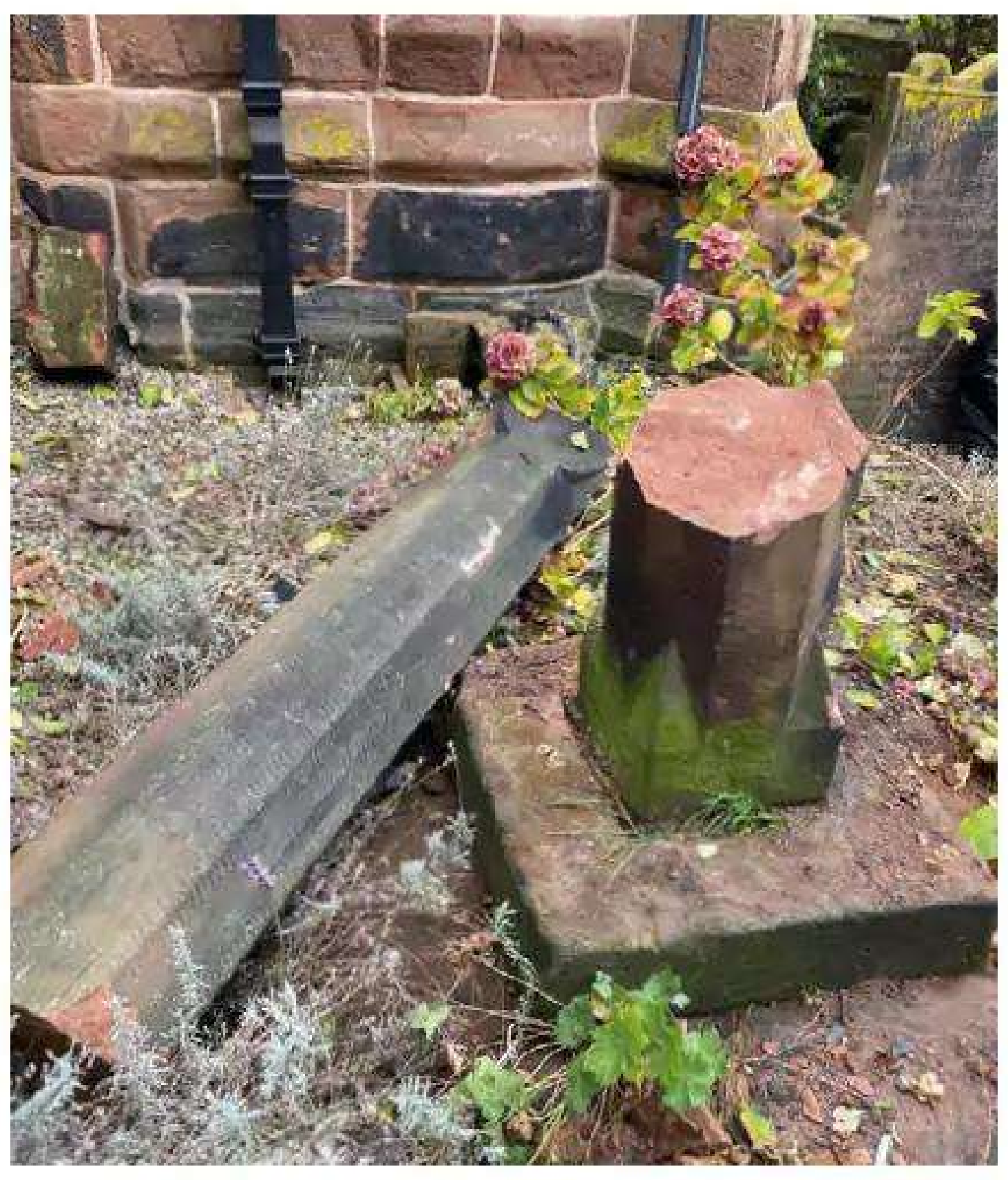
SD TUCKER dons his suit of armour and visits a dragon-haunted church, where, in days of old, knights were quite literally Bold – as that was their surname.

PETER I. VARDY / CREATIVE COMMONS

ABOVE: St Luke's Church, Farnworth. **BELOW:** The ninth-century preaching cross acted like a modern anti-terror bollard.

On the evening of 27 November 2023, at about 8.40pm, a speeding silver saloon car chose just about the worst place to crash in the historic Cheshire village of Farnworth: straight into the oldest object in the area, a 10-foot-tall, ninth-century Anglo-Saxon preaching cross beside which a whole church was later constructed. At least the car didn't plough into a crowd of people. Nor, indeed, did it crash into St Luke's Church itself. In fact, by careering around a bend at top speed and smashing straight through a 15th-century sandstone wall and bang into the heavy cross beyond, the driver – who fled the scene, allegedly under the influence of drugs, before later being apprehended by local police – seemed to hit the only point in the churchyard sturdy enough to prevent him from badly damaging the building itself. In this sense, the preaching cross acted like one of those anti-terror bollards you see in city centres these days, designed to prevent terrorists from driving vehicles into crowds of shoppers. This curious fact drew the attention of Clare Liptrott, a Lay Minister at St Luke's, quoted by the BBC as follows: "It seems the cross saved the church, which sounds like a theological comment." Clare added that: "It's a blessing neither the driver nor anyone else was killed."

From a distance the contraption would look just like a real cow



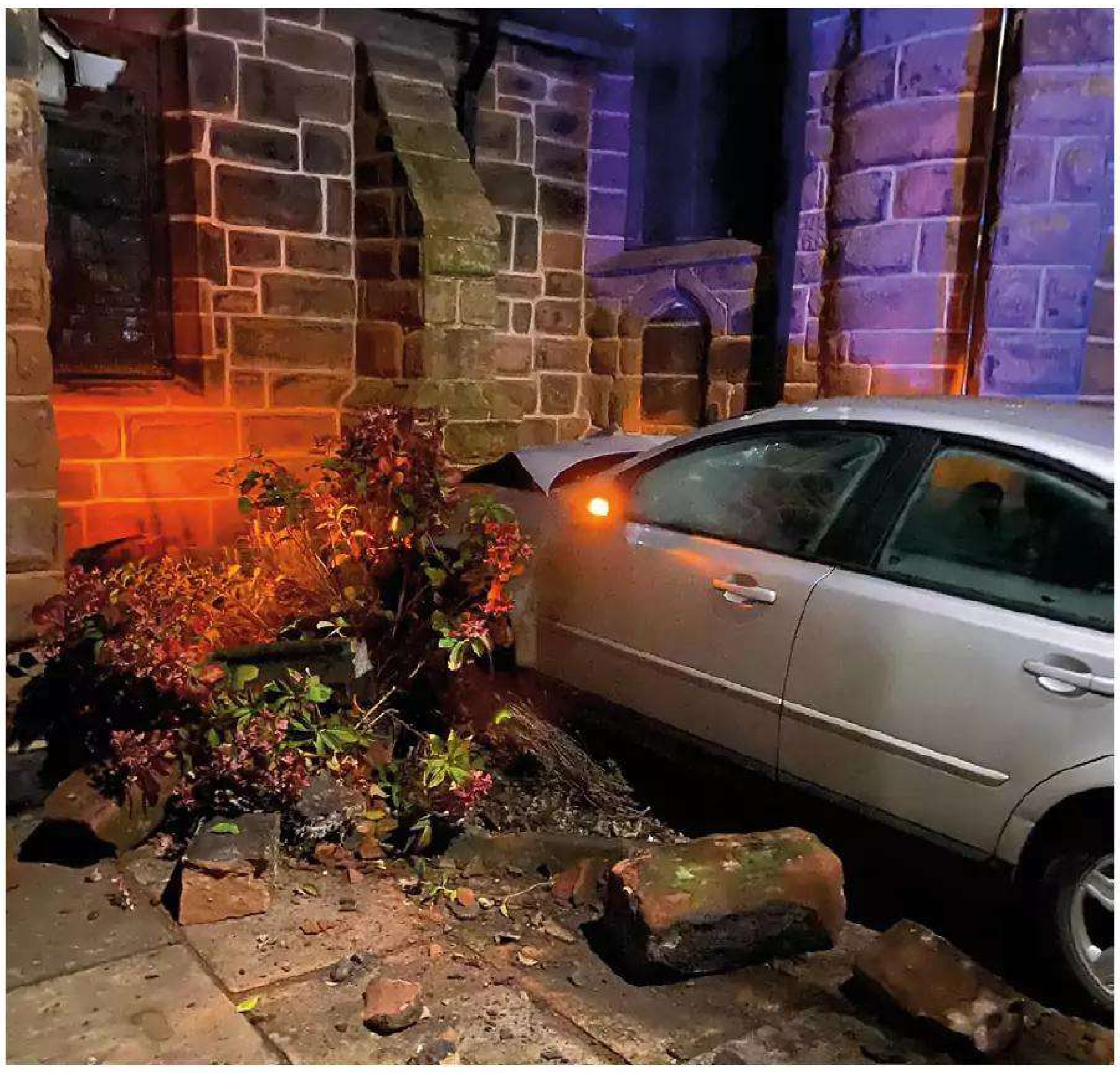
CLARE LIPTROTT / FACEBOOK

Attending the scene of the crash myself some days later in search of any free drugs that might have been left scattered upon the ground, I saw with my own appalled eyes that the damage was quite substantial. A section of the sandstone wall had been taken out completely, while the cross itself was broken in two and lay prostrate on the earth, recalling what Prospero said he would do to his staff at the end of *The Tempest*. Thankfully, the cross can apparently be repaired by a specialist stonemason, though it is estimated this may cost around £16,000.[1]

Did Ms Liptrott really think this close call was a miracle of the Lord? I expect the idea will remain floating around the local area for years to come, adding to its store of myth and legend. St Luke's Church has attracted plenty of that down the years already. Due to its great age, the Grade II* listed building is highly evocative, standing out from the modern residential and commercial buildings which surround it, a time-slip made permanent in solid stone. The picturesque attached cemetery, with paving slabs partly made up of old, upended gravestones from centuries ago, lends the place the quality of a classic likely-to-be-haunted locale. There's no evidence that this is so, granted – but that didn't stop teenage schoolfriends of mine in decades gone by from walking about the cemetery grounds after dark wielding a tape-recorder in search of EVP recordings of the dead.

Farnworth itself (the name means 'Fern Farm' in Ye Olde Anglo-Saxon) boasts some significant former inhabitants including Bishop Wiliam Smyth (1460-1514), co-founder of Oxford's Brasenose College, and Richard Bancroft (1544-1610), Archbishop of Canterbury and 'Chief Overseer' responsible for the creation of the King James Bible. With associations like that, the local church needed to be impressive, and so it is. Dating back in parts to the 12th century, a chapel originally dedicated to St Wilfred being erected in the area c.1180, the building's interior contains several items of genuine interest, including an actual *Scooby Doo*-style fake bookcase that functions as a secret door leading to … well, nowhere. It originally stood in the library of Bold Hall, seat of the now-ruined local gentry family of the same name, so presumably its function today is purely ornamental, its hidden hinges opening onto nothing but a church wall. However, the most interesting item of the church's interior – no longer there – was the hide of an actual dragon!

As you enter the picturesque 'village' of Farnworth – long since swallowed up by the surrounding industrial chemical-manufacturing town of Widnes – you'll spot several indications that this was once a literal dragon's den. Numerous black signs bearing a stylised image of



CLARE LIPTROTT / FACEBOOK

Welcome to
FARNWORTH
Historic Village
Please drive carefully

SD TUCKER

ABOVE LEFT: The scene of destruction at St Luke's after an out-of-control car smashed through the 15th-century wall and straight into the ninth-century cross.
ABOVE RIGHT: The possibly drug-addled driver clearly didn't heed the warnings on local signs, even when they are backed up by the Farnworth's very own dragon.

a fearsome yellow dragon greet visitors, while a nearby local pub is called 'The Griffin': many sources say the beast in question was actually one of these, rather than a classic fire-breathing dragon. The weather-vane atop St Luke's church-tower is shaped like just such a monster, rather than the more usual cockerel.

In my 2013 book *Paranormal Merseyside*, I summarised the legend of the local griffin thus:

"Supposedly, way back when, the villages and farms which lay between Farnworth and Bold Heath... were being repeatedly bothered by a dragon that lived deep within the forests around Halton Castle and which continually flew out from its lair, eating the cattle in the fields and ruining people's livelihoods. A brave blacksmith named Robert Byrch, who lived at Cuerdley Marsh... decided to use his metalworking skills in order to kill it... He constructed a solid metal cage, almost like a suit of armour, large enough for him to hide inside, and with four jointed legs coming down from the bottom of it. Over this, he stretched the hide of a cow, with its head still attached, so that, from a distance, the contraption would look just like a real cow. Robert then took the disguise down to the fields, got inside it, and started mooing, pretending to be just such a ruminant quadruped himself. When the dragon spied him from above, it swooped down and grabbed the fake cow in its claws; whereupon Robert thrust out his sword and stabbed the reptile fatally in its belly. He had to staunch the creature's wounds by shoving his fist inside the hole he had made until the dragon landed, for fear that it would just fall down into the nearby River Mersey and drown him with it, seeing as he was currently encased within heavy metal. When the dragon finally landed on solid ground, Robert jumped out, chopped the weakened lizard's head off, and went away to tell the King.

"The King (the tale never says *which* king) rewarded the blacksmith by knighting him and giving him the new name of Sir Robert Bold, in recognition of his courage. He then awarded the new knight as much land as the dragon's hide would contain. Therefore, cunning Sir Robert quickly sliced up the dead dragon into tiny pieces and laid them all out in a big circle, claiming the land which is known as Bold Heath today, together with the whole of Cuerdley to the south of it. The cow hide which Robert had used to disguise himself with, meanwhile, scored across with the dragon's claw-marks, still hung above the Bold family pew inside nearby Farnworth Church as late as the 1870s... Nowadays, however, the only smoke which is belched out into the air near Cuerdley comes not from a fire-breathing dragon, but from the large cooling-towers of the massive power station at Fiddlers Ferry." [2]

In the decade since I wrote these words, Fiddlers Ferry has been decommissioned: the dragon belches smoke no more. Legends being what they are, other versions of the tale are available, differing in specific details. Some commentators of a euhemerist mindset, for example, have it that the dragon/griffin was really just a symbolic representation of some monstrous regional robber-baron from the distant past who was stabbed to death by a local Robin Hood. Others say the 'dragon skin' that supposedly once hung in St Luke's Church was unexpectedly discovered in 1870, when the canopy of the Bold family's dusty old pew suddenly collapsed, having rotted away with the family's fortunes. Along with the canopy fell a forgotten relic, the hide not of a dragon, but of a cow, covered with claw-marks… perhaps those of a griffin?

Are the dragons of Farnworth still seen today? Well, not as dragons. The area is something of a UFO hotspot, often dubbed 'The Halton Triangle', after the wider borough within which Widnes and Farnworth both sit.

On the night of 27 February 1995, 31-year-old Karen Conlon was walking by the Mersey Estuary in the Castlefields area of Runcorn (opposite Widnes on the other side of the river). She saw an orange glow in the distance, near Fiddlers Ferry power station on the Widnes side, which she initially took to be a street-lamp. However, it was too high for a lamp and was entirely still, so could not have been an aircraft either. A group of six youths arrived, one of whom pointed out that a 'dark tube' or 'black beam' seemed to be coming down from the UFO into the river and was apparently sucking up a column of water from the Mersey!

After 10 minutes the object turned in an arc heading back towards the witnesses. As it got closer, they could see that it was initially oval or 'bell-shaped', before transforming itself into a rectangle. On its base were six reddish lights arranged in formation. It was completely silent, and passed away overhead in the direction of Helsby Hill, where it disappeared… Apparently, fiery orange glows have been reported along this stretch of the Mersey for hundreds of years, even giving rise to a legend of a fire-breathing dragon living in nearby woods.[3]

Maybe the UFOs have been buzzing the area for a long time. Forget a boring old piece of dragon-skin: perhaps the real fortean artefact lurking deep inside the miracle-working walls of St Luke's Church is actually a Roswell-style chunk of alien metal from a crashed UFO…

NOTES

[1] www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-merseyside-67260609; www.st-luke.co.uk/; www.runcornandwidnesworld.co.uk/news/23889547.police-drug-driving-arrest-st-lukes-farnworth-church-crash/

[2] SD Tucker, *Paranormal Merseyside*, Amberley Publishing, 2013, pp.171-3.

[3] *Ibid., pp.229-30; Widnes World*, 2 Mar 1995; *NUFO Bulletin* #170

SD TUCKER is exactly the kind of man who hangs around in graveyards. His latest book, *Hitler's & Stalin's Misuse of Science* (Pen & Sword/Frontline), is out now.

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WHY *FORTEAN*?

FORTEAN TIMES is a monthly magazine of news, reviews and research on strange phenomena and experiences, curiosities, prodigies and portents. It was founded by Bob Rickard in 1973 to continue the work of Charles Fort (1874–1932).

Born of Dutch stock in Albany, New York, Fort spent many years researching scientific literature in the New York Public Library and the British Museum Library. He marshalled his evidence and set forth his philosophy in *The Book of the Damned* (1919), *New Lands* (1923), *Lo!* (1931), and *Wild Talents* (1932).

He was sceptical of dogmatic scientific explanations, observing that some scientists tended to argue according to their personal beliefs rather than the rules of evidence and that inconvenient data were ignored, suppressed, discredited or explained away. He criticised modern science for its reductionism, its attempts to define, divide and separate. Fort's dictum "One measures a circle beginning anywhere" expresses instead his philosophy of Continuity in which everything is in an intermediate and transient state between extremes.

He had ideas of the Universe-as-organism and the transient nature of all apparent phenomena, coined the term 'teleportation', and was perhaps the first to speculate that mysterious lights seen in the sky might be craft from outer space. However, he cut at the very roots of credulity: "I conceive of nothing, in religion, science or philosophy, that is more than the proper thing to wear, for a while."

Fort was by no means the first person to collect anomalies and oddities – such collections have abounded from Greece to China since ancient times. **Fortean Times** keeps alive this ancient task of dispassionate weird-watching, exploring the wild frontiers between the known and the unknown.

Besides being a journal of record, **FT** is also a forum for the discussion of observations and ideas, however absurd or unpopular, and maintains a position of benevolent scepticism towards both the orthodox and unorthodox. **FT** toes no party line.

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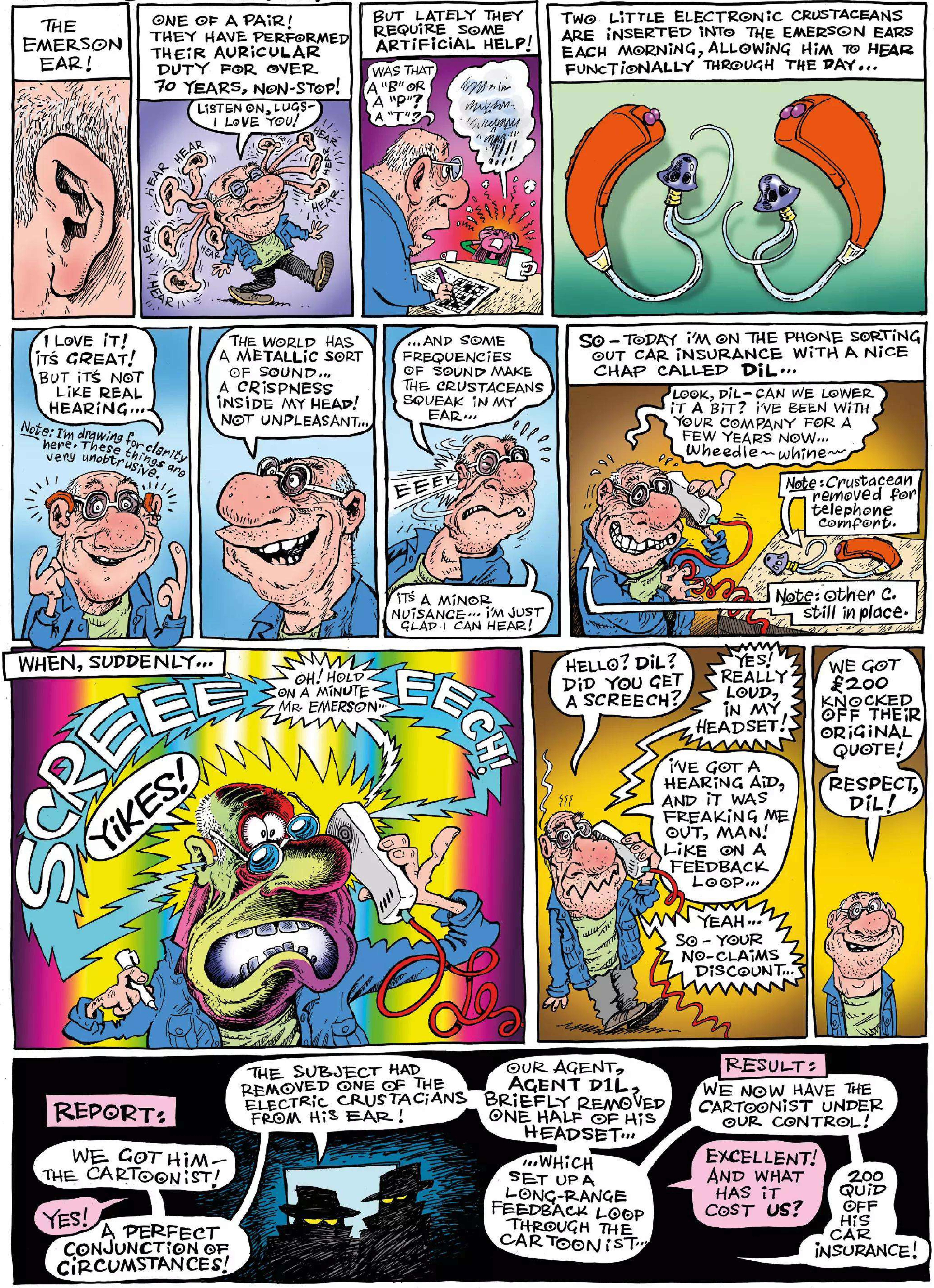
PHENOMENOMIX

CRUSTACEANS

HUNT EMERSON


THE EMERSON EAR!
ONE OF A PAIR! THEY HAVE PERFORMED THEIR AURICULAR DUTY FOR OVER 70 YEARS, NON-STOP!
LISTEN ON, LUGS- I LOVE YOU!
HEAR HEAR
HEAR
HEAR
HEAR
HEAR
HEAR
HEAR
HEAR
BUT LATELY THEY REQUIRE SOME ARTIFICIAL HELP!
WAS THAT A "B" OR A "P"? A "T"?
TWO LITTLE ELECTRONIC CRUSTACEANS ARE INSERTED INTO THE EMERSON EARS EACH MORNING, ALLOWING HIM TO HEAR FUNCTIONALLY THROUGH THE DAY...
I LOVE IT! IT'S GREAT! BUT IT'S NOT LIKE REAL HEARING...
Note: I'm drawing for clarity here. These things are very unobtrusive.
THE WORLD HAS A METALLIC SORT OF SOUND... A CRISPNESS INSIDE MY HEAD! NOT UNPLEASANT...
...AND SOME FREQUENCIES OF SOUND MAKE THE CRUSTACEANS SQUEAK IN MY EAR...
EEEK
IT'S A MINOR NUISANCE... I'M JUST GLAD I CAN HEAR!
SO - TODAY I'M ON THE PHONE SORTING OUT CAR INSURANCE WITH A NICE CHAP CALLED DIL...
LOOK, DIL - CAN WE LOWER IT A BIT? I'VE BEEN WITH YOUR COMPANY FOR A FEW YEARS NOW... Wheedle~whine~
Note: Crustacean removed for telephone comfort.
Note: other C. still in place.
WHEN, SUDDENLY...
SCREEEEECH!
OH! HOLD ON A MINUTE MR. EMERSON...
YIKES!
HELLO? DIL? DID YOU GET A SCREECH?
YES! REALLY LOUD, IN MY HEADSET!
I'VE GOT A HEARING AID, AND IT WAS FREAKING ME OUT, MAN! LIKE ON A FEEDBACK LOOP...
YEAH... SO - YOUR NO-CLAIMS DISCOUNT...
WE GOT £200 KNOCKED OFF THEIR ORIGINAL QUOTE!
RESPECT, DIL!
REPORT:
WE GOT HIM - THE CARTOONIST!
YES!
A PERFECT CONJUNCTION OF CIRCUMSTANCES!
THE SUBJECT HAD REMOVED ONE OF THE ELECTRIC CRUSTACIANS FROM HIS EAR!
OUR AGENT, AGENT DIL, BRIEFLY REMOVED ONE HALF OF HIS HEADSET...
...WHICH SET UP A LONG-RANGE FEEDBACK LOOP THROUGH THE CARTOONIST...
RESULT:
WE NOW HAVE THE CARTOONIST UNDER OUR CONTROL!
EXCELLENT! AND WHAT HAS IT COST US?
200 QUID OFF HIS CAR INSURANCE!

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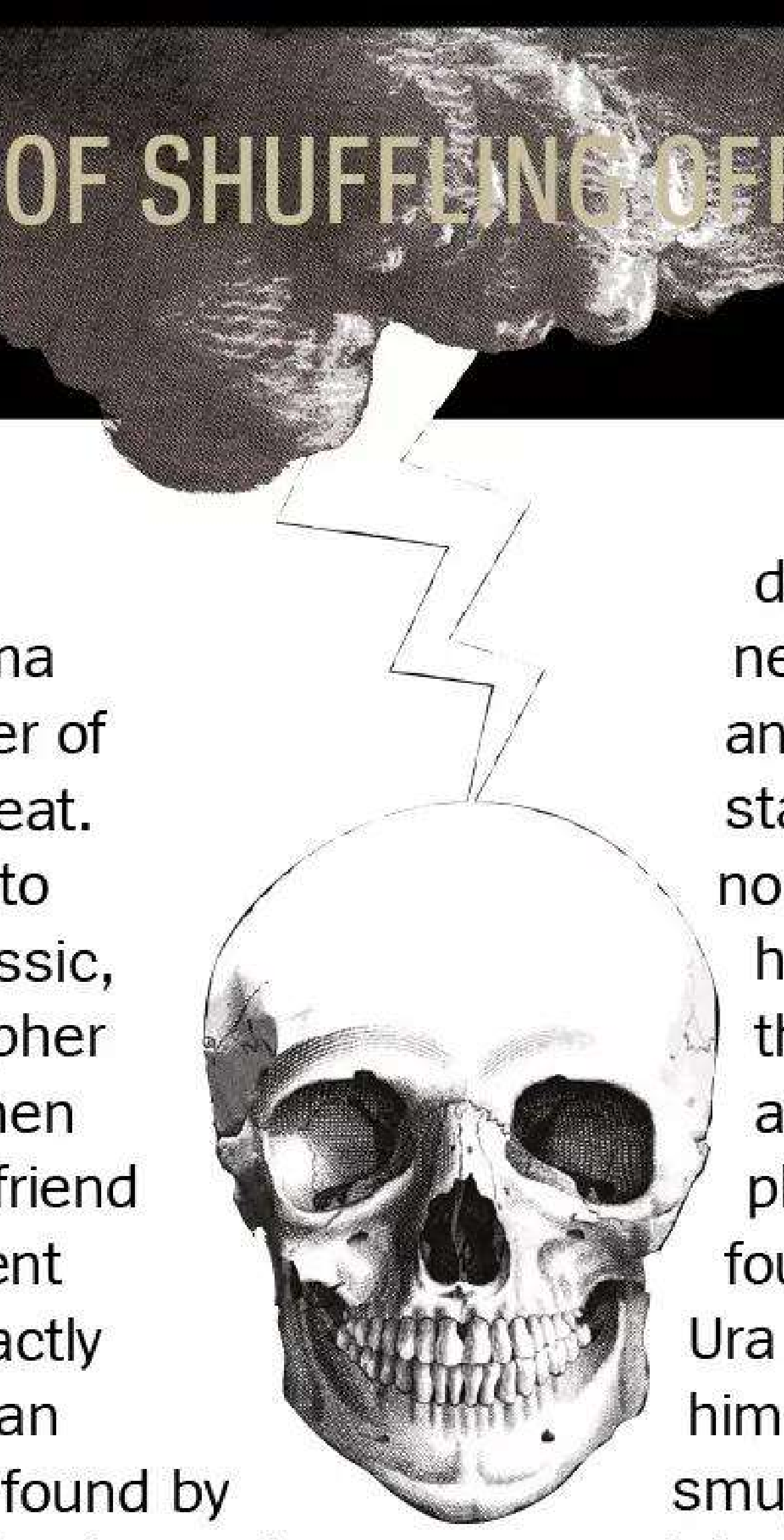
STRANGE DEATHS

UNUSUAL WAYS OF SHUFFLING OFF THIS MORTAL COIL



A showing of the film *The Exorcist: Believer* at a cinema in Lima, Peru, left a member of the audience dead in his seat. The film, another follow-up to William Friedkin's 1973 classic, tells the tale of a photographer confronting extreme evil when his daughter and her best friend are possessed by malevolent entities. It is not known exactly when during the film the man died, as his body was only found by cinema staff after he failed to leave the theatre following the credits. Police have not been able to identify the deceased and his death is being investigated by homicide detectives. Local police chief John Yumpo said: "It is an unusual case; we have never found something similar before, a deceased person in a movie theatre." *express.co.uk, 18 Oct 2023.*

A lawsuit brought by Jessica Ross and Treveon Isaiah Taylor Sr against the Southern Regional Medical Center in Riverdale, Georgia, alleges that a doctor, Tracey St Julian, accidentally decapitated their son during a difficult birth at the hospital. According to the suit, during the delivery, the baby got stuck, but rather than carrying out a cæsarean, St Julian failed to seek help and resorted to applying "ridiculously excessive force" to the baby's head and neck to try and free him, accidentally severing the boy's head as a result. A cæsarean later carried out on Ross removed the baby's legs and body, and it is alleged that the hospital then tried to cover up the decapitation by wrapping and propping up the child's body to make it appear that the head was still attached, discouraged the family from getting an autopsy and tried to get them to have the body cremated. The lawsuit claims gross negligence, fraud and intentional infliction of emotional distress and seeks unspecified punitive damages. *[AP] 9 Aug 2023.*

Police in Sapporo, Japan, arrested 29-year-old Runa Tamura and her parents, as well as seizing around 20 blades, including four saws, after finding a man's severed head in the bathroom of their family home. The arrests followed the death of Hitoshi Ura, 62, three weeks before in a local "love hotel" where guests can rent rooms by the hour. Hotel CCTV showed Ura entering the hotel at 10.50pm on 2 July with a woman, later identified as Tamura, who left three hours later wearing different clothes and carrying a large suitcase. Ura was found dead in their hotel room bath the next morning, his corpse naked and without its head. He had been stabbed to death but there was no sign of a struggle, and the body had no defensive injuries; it is thought his head was severed after death. Ura's clothes and phone were also nowhere to be found. It is believed Tamura lured Ura to the hotel, where she killed him and severed his head, then smuggled it out in the suitcase along with his possessions, after which her father picked her up and took her home. Police have been unable to find a motive for the killing, or the theft of Ura's head, nor have they worked out where Tamura got the suitcase, as she didn't arrive with it. The Tamuras were initially charged with "corpse abandonment", but following the discovery of a video, apparently shot by Runa, showing Ura's killing and beheading, murder charges are likely to follow. *Herald Star, 27 Jul 2023.*

Walking through an area known for fortune tellers in Maceió, Brazil, Fernanda Silva Valoz da Cruz Pinto was approached by an elderly woman who offered to read her palm. Pinto took up the offer, and the woman scrutinised her hand, delivering an ominous reading that suggested that she had only "a few days to live", after which the fortune teller gave her a chocolate. Pinto ate it, and shortly afterwards began to complain of feeling ill, saying, "My heart is racing. I've thrown up. But I have this taste in my mouth. So bitter. Bad. My vision is blurry. I'm so weak." Her family initially thought her problems were a resurgence of the gastritis and ulcers she had previously suffered, but when she bled from the nose, vomited blood, and started to froth at the mouth, they rushed her to the Santa Casa de Misericordia Hospital. Despite the best efforts of the doctors, Pinto died there the next day. The autopsy report showed that the chocolate Pinto had been given by the palm reader was laced with "high concentrations of pesticides", including the extremely toxic insecticides sulfotep and terbufos. "As the (chocolate) was packaged, it didn't occur to her (that it could pose any danger)," Bianca Cristina, Pinto's cousin, said. "And as she was hungry, she decided to eat it." She added that "if it was someone who ordered the killing or if the [fortune teller] killed her because she wanted to, only the police will find out". *themessenger.com, 4 Oct 2023.*

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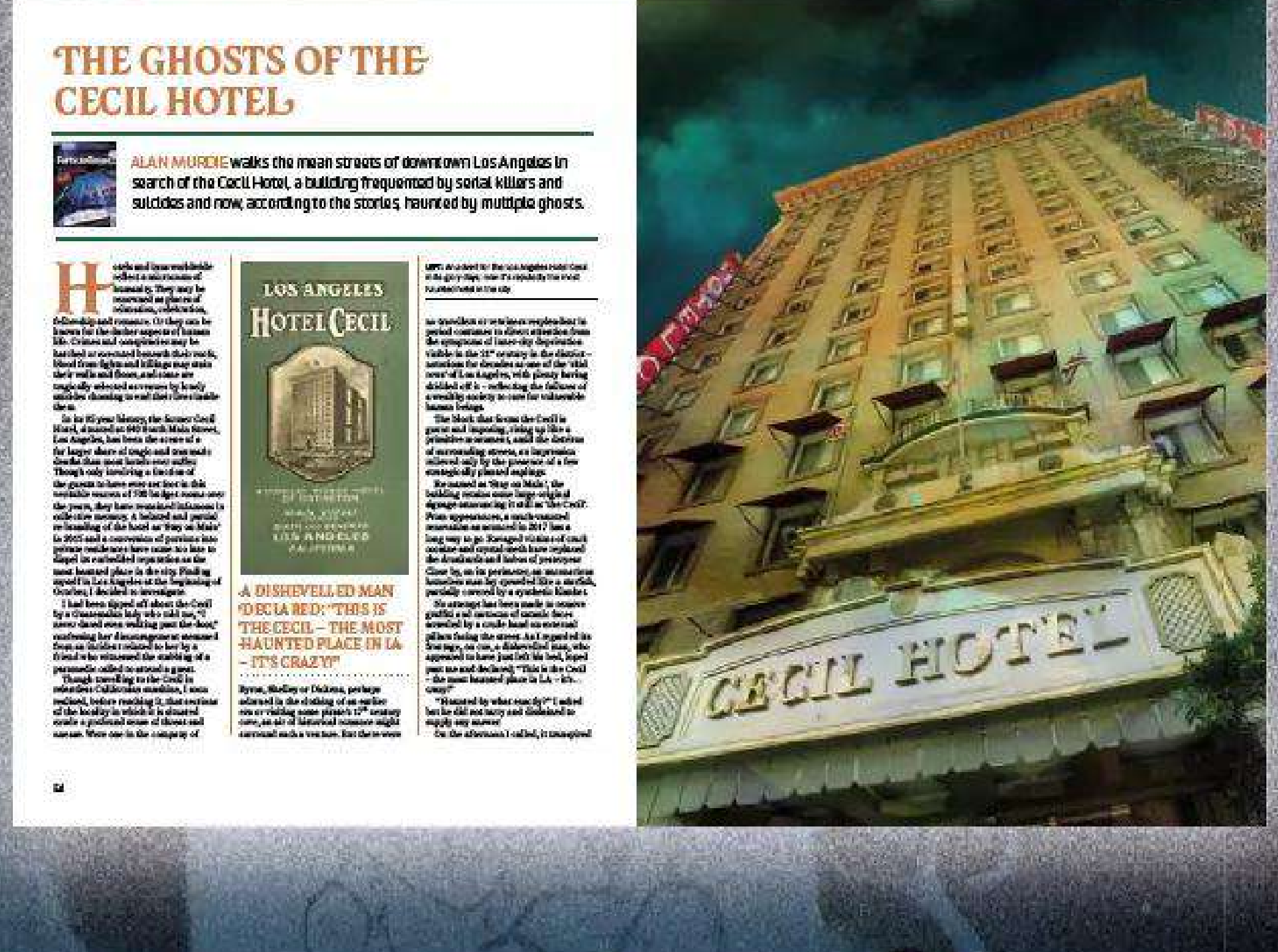

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